



KINDLING AND ASHES

GEORGE BARR McCUTCHEON



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*OR, THE HEART OF
BARBARA WAYNE*

BY

George Barr McCutcheon



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BOOK ONE

CHAPTER ONE

BENJAMIN THE FIRST

MR. AND MRS. WAYNE lived down the road a little way. They had three children. Two of them were boys. The other, at that time, did not matter.

Up at the top of the road,—the children spoke of it as the top of the road because nothing but sky could be seen beyond,—up there lived the Jaggards, monarchs of all they surveyed. As a matter of fact, everybody in the district lived down the road from the Jaggards; there was no one else at the “top” save Jaggards. It was all the same whether you wended your way along the road from the east or from the west,—still the Jaggards indisputably lived at the top of it.

Looking up from the foot of the long hill,—say from the easterly home of the Waynes—the drab gravel highway ended precisely where the sky began. If you were a very small, obedient and therefore gullible child, you would have believed what grown-up people told you: that you could step straight into heaven if you were very, very good and were able to walk the long half-mile to where the road ran into the sky.

Some days the highway ended in great black clouds that rumbled and were frightful to behold; other days in an endless opal wall; still others in fiery red, streaked with green and gold and blue,—brief spectacle of that horrific promise alluded to as hell-fire and brimstone.

Up there on the crest of the long ridge in a big, rambling house, lived old Benjamin Jaggard and the Jaggards who were waiting for him to die. Once a day, at half-past eight in the morning, rain or shine, warm or cold, week in, week

out, the doctor's horse and buggy crept fantastically up over the rim at the top of the road, moved sluggishly along the sky for a short distance, and then turned sharply to the left into a hedge-lined lane that led to old Benjamin's house, which stood two or three hundred yards back from the highway in a rigid oasis of cedars. Passing into this lane the vehicle at once was transformed into a strange black beetle that crawled along the top of the evergreen hedge; nothing could be seen of horse or buggy, that is, nothing save the canopy dominating the latter. At half-past eight every morning, as punctual as the clock itself, that familiar old buggy slid silently into the lane and became a beetle.

The little Wayne children on their way to school could tell with absolute certainty by the doctor's buggy whether they were in danger of being late. If the doctor turned into the lane before they reached the intersecting dirt-road a quarter of the way up the hill, they knew they would have to hurry if they were to beat the school bell. Two of the children, profiting by the warning, were rarely if ever late, for they had long, spindling legs and could run very fast over the "short cut" through the meadow to the schoolhouse down the dirt by-road. The other had short little legs and besides was afraid of snakes and toads. So she kept to the road and often was tearfully late. She really didn't matter, however, for she was merely the little sister of the Wayne boys.

But, in course of time, this little girl grew up to be a tall, lovely, young person, and one day ran off with the grandson of old Benjamin Jaggard,—and then she mattered,—for she had committed a heinous offense in the eyes of the proud but lowly Waynes and an even greater one so far as the Jaggards were concerned.

This came to pass long after Dr. Higgs had ceased making his daily visits to the house at the top of the road; long after old Benjamin had gone to his grave; long after the doctor's venerable horse had passed away and his buggy,

in a sad state of decrepitude, was relegated to the happy hunting-ground of all such vehicles,—a despised, unsheltered corner of the barn-lot. The great black beetle was no more to be seen creeping along the top of the hedge. The doctor was making his rounds in a sprightly Ford, driven with considerable dash by the same darky who had languished for years in the wake of old Birdie as she jogged imperturbably about her business indifferent to the gentle, regular tap of the whip upon her capacious rump.

The cedars were taller and scrawnier but on the other hand the house and all the outbuildings at the top of the hill seemed strangely to have shrunk in size; what once were gigantic, overpowering structures in the eyes of the tiny Waynes down the road were now ridiculously unimpressive to the tall Waynes who had shot up to maturity since the passing of old Benjamin. The long sweep of sloping pasturelands was unchanged; to be sure, the hill itself was not nearly so high,—indeed it was rather an insignificant hump rising from the broad fertile plain,—but, after all, it was "*the* hill."

At its western base, invisible from the home of the Waynes down at the foot of the eastern slope, ran the same sluggish stream, lined with sycamores and willows, that had been known as a river to all little "shavers," and beyond the "river" lay the thriving town of Hurdleford, once a vast, exciting place to which the circus came every year with its street parade, its tents and its stirring side-show banners. Hurdleford, twice as vast as it had been in those ancient days, was now no more than a shady, sleepy, old town of less than two thousand inhabitants: a giant turned dwarf by the paradoxical processes of growth. For as the little Waynes, the little Jaggard boy and all the other youngsters grew up so high that they could see the rest of the world, so Hurdleford grew smaller by comparison. The children who came into the world about the time old Benjamin was ready to go out of it were men and women

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now and they had seen Chicago, Indianapolis, even New York; they had seen the Mississippi River and the Ohio; a goodly number of them had looked upon Niagara Falls and the Atlantic Ocean. To them Hurdleford had long since ceased to be a gigantic, mysterious, thrilling place,—where the end of the world was located, and the north pole, and George Washington,—and everything else of consequence.

Still, all things considered, it was Hurdleford and, so far as this narrative is concerned, the most important town in the whole universe. For, when all is said and done, this is a tale of the Waynes, the Jaggards and the house at the “top of the road,” with a few other people and Hurdleford itself thrown in for good measure.

Dr. Higgs had ushered a whole generation into the world, and was now well along on his job of bringing in its successor. He had been the first to look upon scores of nondescript atoms as they struggled into existence, and to him they all looked alike. He couldn’t, for the life of him, detect any noticeable difference between a Jaggard infant and a Wayne infant—and yet there *was* a difference despite his uncalculating eye! He confessed to a distinction between colored and white babies, to be sure, but in all other respects babies were babies and you couldn’t tell them apart to save your soul. They were all ugly; they all had legs and arms and what passed for faces. It didn’t matter whether they were born to master or man, to culture or ignorance, to wealth or poverty, they came into the world in precisely the same fashion and looked exactly alike. Babies were babies, and that was all you could say for them until the next day. On the other hand, the Waynes, after all, were Waynes and the Jaggards were Jaggards; and you couldn’t get away from that, either.

The former were poor, the latter were rich,—but you could trace the Waynes back to the days of Queen Elizabeth and you couldn’t trace the Jaggards back of old

Benjamin's father to save your soul,—indeed, if you left it to Benjamin himself you would not have been allowed even that much latitude in your genealogical snooping, for the less said about Benjamin's father the better. The family never mentioned him. He had been strung up as a horse-thief.

It had taken two generations to live him down,—and even then, he cropped up occasionally to plague the family. There is a saying that it is hard to keep a good man down. It is even harder to keep a bad one down. Notwithstanding the fact that Benjamin never had seen his father,—the stringing up having taken place a few days before he was born,—he was fairly well acquainted with the tree down in Kentucky that had served as a gibbet. It was a big, shady tree at the bottom of the barn-lot and he used to play under it as a lad.

That, of course, was a long time ago,—for Benjamin was eighty when he died,—and it is only proper to say that he did not know how closely related he was to the tree until he was five or six years old. Shortly after that his mother, disagreeably haunted by the spectacle that had urged Benjamin into the world a full month ahead of time, married again and moved north. That is to say, across the Ohio River into the new state of Indiana. But Benjamin never forgot that tree. He had a bit of sentiment in his hard and miserly soul. When he was twenty-one he went back to the place of his birth and, with the few dollars he had saved, bought the forlorn little farm and with his own hands chopped down the tree and made a great bonfire of it.

Nor was he without a grim sense of humor. Shortly after her marriage, his only daughter-in-law, for purposes of her own, undertook to grow a family tree for the Jagards. She appealed to old Benjamin.

"You know what I mean by a family tree, don't you, father," she said.

"I do," said he, dryly. "If I was you, Caroline, I wouldn't bother about it. It don't exist any more. I chopped it down a good many years ago. It was an oak tree."

"I don't mean that kind of a tree," she said, patiently.

"I know you don't. But if you can trace the Jaggard family any farther back than that oak tree, you're doing more than I can do. You might ask the Waynes down the road there. I guess maybe they can tell you a lot about our family tree, Caroline. They come originally from the same part of the country that I come from. You see, Caroline, the Wayne family owned the hosses that my father stole and I guess some of 'em was present when he was strung up by the neck to that old oak tree. But, as I say, that was seventy odd years ago and if I was you I wouldn't do much talking about the Jaggard family tree."

He winked before going on: "Maybe you'll understand now why the Waynes, spite of 'em being as poor as all get-out, don't seem to care much about us Jaggards. Of course, all this happened long before their time. I can recollect mighty well when I was five or six years old hearing their grandpap,—who wasn't anybody's grandpap then because he was only eight or thereabout,—I can recollect him calling me poor white trash and pointing out the tree where my pap was hung for stealing his pap's hosses. You might call him great-great-grandfather, come to think of it, seeing as his grandson down the road here has just begot another son, as the Scriptures say. Somehow the Waynes sandwiched in an extra generation on us Jaggards, on account of my son neglecting to get married till he was long past forty. So you see there's practically four generations of Waynes to remember what our family tree is and only three generations of us Jaggards to forget it. And our latest generation is only a year or two old, as you may remember, being as he is your son, Caroline. Now young Shelby Wayne down the road has got a couple of sons so that gives 'em somewhat of an edge on us, don't it? Some day, like as not,

when this last little Wayne baby is old enough to talk he'll throw it up to your little boy, Caroline, that his great-grandfather was hung for hoss-stealing, and maybe he'll go farther than that and say that he is poor white trash, no matter if I do own all the land in this part of the county. Seems to me I wouldn't try to set out a new family tree, Caroline, until people have sort of forgot what we had hanging to the old one."

His daughter-in-law, recovering from the shock of disclosure, compressed her lips and demanded:

"Did Absalom know of—of all this when he married me?"

"He did. I told him soon after the Waynes moved up here after the war. I thought it was better for him to hear it from me than from them."

"Did your wife know of it when she married you?"

"She did. But she was a good, simple sort of woman and wasn't thinking about trees in the same way as you are, Caroline."

"I think Absalom should have told me," she flared.

The old man smiled sardonically. "I done my best to make him tell you, Caroline, before he asked you to marry him,—but he wouldn't. You see, we both knowed if he told you you wouldn't marry him."

"I see," she said, paling with anger. "And that is why you wanted him to tell me?"

"Exactly," said he, with the same brutal frankness that always had marked his manner toward his daughter-in-law.

His only son, Absalom, had gone to Indianapolis for a wife; and that young woman, on coming to Hurdleford, had done precisely what his father feared she would do, or would attempt to do, which came to the same thing so far as he was concerned: turn the place upside down in her desire to be the "first lady of the land," as he put it. He enjoyed nothing better than to take her down a peg or two

whenever the opportunity afforded,—and that was quite often.

She hated him and he knew it. He rather liked that, too. It gave him considerable satisfaction to know that she hated him and could do nothing about it. He even found a grim, unnatural joy in the knowledge that the impoverished Waynes down the road made no effort to conceal the fact that they regarded Caroline as “one of the Jaggards” and therefore considerably beneath their notice! For old Benjamin, despite his wealth and notwithstanding all the years that stood between him and a distant childhood, still figuratively bent the knee to his betters. Down in his steely old heart he knew that he could not lord it over the Waynes. He might crush them, break them, hound them, but they would still be “quality,” they would still be his betters. He would always be “poor white trash” to them,—and, for that matter, to himself.

It takes more than one lifetime to wipe out the stain of conscious inferiority; it takes more than gold and lands and power to change the breed. Benjamin Jaggard knew down in his soul that so long as he lived he would be one of those “low-down Jaggards.” He needed no clearer proof of this than his own sullen, grudging respect for the impecunious Waynes. Something deep-rooted in his nature caused him invariably to hesitate before bowing to his stalwart, high-headed young neighbour, Shelby Wayne, until after that gentleman had condescended to bow to him first. And, strangely enough, he never resented it when Wayne failed on occasion to nod to him in passing. He hated the young man from the bottom of his soul, as he hated all the Waynes before him, but he would have confessed,—had he been qualified to put his sensations into words,—to a queer, indefinable surge of gratitude when the young man *did* give him greeting, be it ever so casual.

And when Shelby’s mother, the widow of the Wayne who died at Shiloh,—when she bowed to him, he experienced a

sudden but brief exaltation that left no doubt in his mind as to its origin. He felt the same way, in a lesser degree, when young Mrs. Wayne, Shelby's wife, smiled at him, however distantly. So he knew, beyond all argument, that he had not lived down,—nor could he ever live down,—that heritage of the "pore white," the thing that was bred in him: lack of pride.

He was rich. He had made it all himself. Paradoxically, he was very proud of himself for having made this money, notwithstanding the fact that he was utterly without pride. If he had had any pride at all he would have despised himself as his neighbours despised him for the means he was known to have employed in acquiring his fortune; he would have felt the scorn of the Waynes and no doubt would have inwardly resented it. He was not, however, disturbed by the conviction that the Waynes knew he had grown rich in the war that had rendered them penniless; he knew they were aware of the fact that he had trafficked in the wake of both armies, first plying his greedy, unwholesome trade behind the troops of the South until they reached the stage where their custom was unprofitable, then slyly and successfully transferring his operations to the Northern armies, from whom, opulent by comparison, he reaped a harvest that put him forever outside the shadow of want.

He was loyal to neither side. He fattened on both. From a small but crafty "sutler" he grew with amazing swiftness into one of the most prosperous and relentless of "traders." He was a "gouger" whose rapacity knew no bounds. At the beginning of the Civil War he was a poor man; at its close he was rich. He had not been dishonest in the strict sense of the term; he merely had played the game as it was being played by the profiteers of his day.

But the Southland, the land of his birth, was not the place for him to live after the four years of strife were over. He pushed even farther North into the State of Indiana, out of those lower districts where sympathy with the Con-

federate cause was so thinly veiled that many of the people were known as "copperheads," and came in '66 to the town of Hurdleford, where with his ill-gotten proceeds he bought farm lands and timber lands of wide acreage. With the panic of '73 he reached down into the town itself with greedy hands and closed his fingers upon parcel after parcel of valuable residence property, several business blocks and, most important of all, a tottering State bank. He got "bargains" everywhere, for the panic had forced men to sell or mortgage property on the best terms obtainable. His riches multiplied. The old house on the hill overlooking the town and the sycamore-lined river fell into his hands at a sacrifice, together with the fields and pastures belonging to the Studley family, several hundred acres of good grain and grazing land. Old man Studley with his wife and daughter moved out of the house among the cedars at the top of the bald ridge and took up their residence in the small farmhouse "down the road." A sixty-acre tract was all that remained to them after the rest had passed into the hands of Benjamin, the horse-thief's son.

Nor would old Studley sell this last bit of ground to the land-grabber. He kept this little farm free of incumbrance; Jaggard was never able to squeeze it out of him, connive as he would. Studley's little farm lay in the very heart of Jaggard's possessions; it could have been likened to an island, so completely was it surrounded by the holdings of the interloper. It was a rich, fertile patch of earth and Benjamin's soul hungered for it.

He was not a praying man but there was an unvoiced prayer ever uppermost in his mind: a supplication to God to let him outlive William Studley so that before his own end came he could wrest the land from the aged widow. And so he sat himself down to wait for old Studley to die. To his chagrin and, if the truth must be told, his distress, Mrs. Studley died before her husband. This event was distressing in that it was likely to upset his calculations. He

found some solace, however, in the belief that Studley's heir, a married daughter who lived somewhere in the South, would not care to retain this distant little farm, so remote from her own home. Indeed, Mrs. Studley's death might even turn out to be a godsend,—(that is the way he callously put it),—for there was the probability that the daughter, in her eagerness to get rid of the property, would jump at the chance to sell it at any price.

But what old Benjamin, lord of the hilltop, did not know was that Studley's daughter, long before the war, had married a man named Wayne. He knew in a vague sort of way,—for he was not interested in the affairs of other people,—that she was a widow. Her husband, a colonel in the Confederate army, had been killed at Shiloh.

Studley died at last. The coveted little farm went to the widowed daughter. Benjamin suppressed his eagerness and resigned himself for what he considered a decent, commendable length of time before opening negotiations for the property,—a month, to be specific. Then, for the first time, he learned that Studley's daughter was Mrs. Stephen Eskridge Wayne, that she lived in the town of Orkney, Kentucky, and that she was the widow of the son of Colonel George Wayne. He was flabbergasted, bewildered. Orkney was the town in whose outskirts he was born; and George Wayne was the boy who first told him the ugly story of the big oak tree, and taunted him with being the son of the man who was strung up for stealing Wayne horses.

He had heard, years before, that the Waynes had lost all their money, their lands, their blooded horses, and were practically penniless. The war had done for them what the panic had done for Studley. But no adversity, no calamity could ever make "pore white trash" of them. Benjamin had no doubts about this. He knew what they were made of; he knew that nothing could ever bring them down to the level of the Jaggards. Time,—ages, perhaps,—might bring the Jaggards up to the level of the Waynes, but—well, the

Waynes were gentle-folk back in the days of Queen Elizabeth, and in the proud southland he had heard of Queen Elizabeth and her court almost as soon as he had heard of Adam and Eve, or Santa Claus.

Then one day Studley's daughter came to live in the farmhouse down the road. With her came her father-in-law, broken-down George Wayne, now a white-haired man of seventy-five, and her son Shelby, a handsome fellow in the early twenties. This was in 1875.

George Wayne died a year or so later and Benjamin was conscious of a lessening of the weight that bore down upon him; for while Wayne generously refrained from indicating by word or sign that he remembered a certain unlovely passage in the history of the Jaggard family, there still remained the knowledge that he had by no means forgotten it. On the few occasions when the two old men met, Wayne casually recalled their boyhood days in Orkney; he even indulged in pleasant reminiscences of those far-gone times.

Benjamin was not grateful. He took it simply as a matter of course. It was the way with thoroughbreds; it was the way with gentlemen. He could not imagine a real gentleman of the South striking at a man who was unable to defend himself; nor, for that matter, could he conceive of the Waynes "caring a whoop" about anything connected with the lives or the deeds of the low-down Jaggards.

But he knew that in the privacy of their little home down the road, they discussed the Jaggards; they talked of the horse-thief's son.

Benjamin was rather glad when his own time came to die. He did that when his only grandchild was nine years old and in the full knowledge that the youngster,—a handsome, sturdy little chap,—was "pore white trash" after all and could never be anything else!

But this narrative has little to do with old Benjamin, save as a shadow, an influence, a mortal background, so to speak. Nor does it really begin when his grandson, young

Benjamin Jaggard, the Second, twenty-three years of age, ran away with the idolized but wayward daughter of Shelby Wayne. It does not begin until the day that Bennie returned to the house on the hill, after an absence of a year and a half, to set himself square with his own father who was about to die and who had made a will practically disinheriting his son for marrying a Wayne.

Bennie came home to tell his dying father, Absalom Jaggard, that he had not married a Wayne!

CHAPTER TWO

BENJAMIN THE SECOND

BENJAMIN JAGGARD, the Second, arrived in the town of Hurdleford, unheralded, on the morning of a day in September, 1910. Word of his unexpected return swept through the town like wildfire. The few citizens who happened to see him,—and to greet him with questionable warmth,—lost no time in spreading the news. Within the hour his return was being discussed in every store; carried by eager customers of both sexes, the sensational event soon became the sole topic of conversation in practically every home in town. On sidewalks, in front and back yards, even in the fields and garden patches beyond the “city limits,” people talked of Bennie Jaggard’s sudden and unexplained appearance, and great was the speculation as to what would be the outcome of it. For the town of Hurdleford had forgotten neither the elopement nor the openly announced resolve of Bennie’s father never to speak to or to notice his son again because of his unforgivable act in running away with a child of the Waynes.

Too well did Hurdleford remember an event, although five years had passed since it happened, when Bennie’s mother, relieving herself of long pent-up fury, had publicly,—(at a church festival, to be specific),—allowed her feelings to get the better of her to such an extent that she said things to Mrs. Shelby Wayne which, without the need of being magnified by first, second or even third-hand repetition, were so insulting and so conclusive that the whole town was shocked by her vituperation. And Hurdleford also remembered that Mrs. Shelby Wayne, while allowing herself thus to be publicly branded as a “rebel,” a “stuck-up pauper,” an “imi-

tation lady," a "lazy, no good Southerner" and other unflattering things, coolly kept her chin elevated,—(her nose as well),—and instead of denying any of these singularly personal charges merely advised Mrs. Jaggard to "hold her horses," adding that if she was unable to do so they (the Waynes) knew of a Jaggard who could. This retort was not looked upon as at all adequate by Hurdleford church members but it was unaccountably overwhelming to the enraged Mrs. Jaggard, who, they say, became quite livid in the face and subsequently swooned in the chapel.

This scene was the cause of an open break between the two families. It led, the next day, to an encounter between Shelby Wayne and Absalom Jaggard. It was a bloodless and more or less wordless encounter. They met on Center Street and the former advised the latter that if he or his wife ever spoke to him or *his* wife again, he would "hoss-whip" him, insolently and, so far as the witnesses were concerned, inexplicably adding that he took it for granted that any Jaggard would know what was meant by "hoss-whip." Mr. Jaggard informed Mr. Wayne that he would knock his head off, whereupon bystanders interfered. The last named gentleman, being a true Southerner, challenged his adversary to a duel with pistols, Absalom bluntly sending back word that Mr. Wayne could go to the devil. After that, the Waynes and the Jaggards were open, avowed and natural enemies.

A few years after this, both Mrs. Jaggard and Mrs. Wayne died in the same week and, strangely enough of the same disease,—typhoid fever. Then, as if to mock the very memory of their loving mothers, the only son of Caroline Jaggard and the only daughter of Betty Wayne stupefied Hurdleford by running off with each other and were promptly and perhaps righteously disowned by their fathers. This came to pass within a year after the deaths of the two women. From that day to the moment of Bennie's descent from the Pullman, Hurdleford had neither seen nor heard of

the disloyal young people, nor were questions ever put to their fathers as to their whereabouts or welfare. The subject was rendered delicate and even impossible of approach by the reserve of the two parents whose silence, for some inconceivable reason, not even the most prying of friends had the heart to violate.

The sympathy of the people was with Shelby Wayne. He was well-liked, a gentleman "of the old school," genial if at times patronizing, friendly though conscious of the superiority of his southern blood, courtly and at the same time delightfully shiftless; a good story-teller, generous, courageous, mildly bibulous, decently profane, and, like all good "rebels," a firebrand.

He came to Hurdleford an alien American, so to speak. As such he had lived, as such he had brought up his children, and yet there was no more loyal, no more patriotic citizen than he. His father had been killed in battle by these people of the Northland; his uncles and his cousins had fought against the men in blue and had died or suffered in a cause he loved but could not defend because of his youth; his people had been broken and impoverished, crushed but not humbled by the people in whose midst he now found himself by the strange turn of Fate's wheel; but he had no harsh word for the victor, he held no grudge against his northern neighbour, despite the fact that he was of the generation that took the war harder than those who fought in it. For more than thirty years he had lived in what he might have called the enemy's country, and he was beloved and respected by those whom he was privileged to speak of as "Yanks."

Hurdleford liked the Waynes. It was grieved when Shelby's wife died and it was saddened by the death of his wife's mother, the one time Jennie Studley, a county girl. It rejoiced when Shelby's children came, for he made those happy events the occasion of pleasant celebrations in which no man or woman of his acquaintance was ignored.

His two boys were gallant, upstanding, straightforward lads who grew up to be handsome, likeable, young men, contrarily energetic in contrast to their horse-loving, easy-going father, and many were the maidens who looked with favor upon the junior Waynes with the consent and approval of careful mothers and hard-headed fathers. (True, there was a slight feminine resentment felt toward them as they grew older and failed to marry but it was of a secret nature and by no means permanent.)

Barbara Lee Wayne, Shelby's daughter, was loved and admired by all Hurdleford, even by the younger element in her own sex. She was a slender, lovely, gay-hearted girl. When she was eighteen she horrified her mother and shocked her father by accepting a "position" as clerk (they did not call it saleslady) in Stidham's Bookstore. This was a form of independence,—some said "grit,"—that further endeared her to Hurdleford; instead of lowering her social standing, it seemed to elevate it, if such a thing were possible. People had always thought of the Waynes as southern aristocrats. It may be stated here and with truth that young lady members of the best families in Hurdleford, if unmarried and not called upon to keep house for widowed fathers, did not consider it beneath their dignity to work in stores and offices or even for Uncle Sam under the town postmaster. Only the girls whose people were quite well-off neglected these opportunities to be at least partially self-supporting. The girls who worked in stores and offices, if otherwise acceptable, were quite as prominent socially as those who did not, for in Hurdleford there was no distinction between the respectable and educated poor (meaning by "poor" those who merely had savings-bank accounts) and the equally respectable and educated rich (those who did not keep their money in savings-banks.) While it would have been quite all right to speak of Mr. Jones as rich because he owned property, ran a successful business or loaned money out at interest, one never thought of speak-

ing of Mr. Smith as poor because he clerked in a store, kept books or was in the employ of the aforesaid Mr. Jones. The richest banker in town shared a pew in the Presbyterian Church with the bookkeeper for the grain elevator; their wives called each other by their first names and their daughters, having attended the same public school and the same high school together, were friends and companions.

But Hurdleford did not like Absalom Jaggard, nor his wife. They were respected but they were not liked. The latter, having come from Indianapolis, considered herself superior to the women of Hurdleford, and made little or no effort to conceal the fancy. And why should she? She came of one of the best families in the capital and had attended a rather fashionable boarding-school. While it is true that the smart set in Indianapolis,—the people who entertained and had their names in the society columns of the newspapers,—were unaware of Caroline's existence and therefore totally ignorant as to her virtues and graces, it is nevertheless a fact that she did come of one of the best families in that city. It was not a family fault, nor even a flaw, that her mother kept a boarding-house following the death of Caroline's father, who had lost all of his money in gold mines or something equally imperial out in the rocky West. He was one of those honourable and foolish men who believe that all other men are honourable and foolish.

Young Mrs. Jaggard let it be known in Hurdleford that her father was largely interested in mines; she also spoke in rather hushed tones of her grandfather who, it seems, was a famous sculptor. (In view of the fact that her forebear conducted a "marble yard" near one of the Indianapolis cemeteries, supplying monuments, shafts and gravestones to needy customers, Mrs. Jaggard may be forgiven perhaps for speaking of him in hushed tones but she was drawing a long bow when she described him as a sculptor.)

As for Bennie Jaggard, Hurdleford thought he put on airs,

having gone east to acquire manner and education in a college not far removed from New York City. The young man was not disliked, however. In fact, Hurdleford was fair enough, in view of his attainments, to admit that he deserved a better chance to make something of himself than could be found in the little town in middle Indiana. The inhabitants of Hurdleford were, in a way, rather proud of Bennie. He was the only eastern college graduate in the place and he had a way of wearing his clothes that set him somewhat apart from his less favored contemporaries. It was known,—indeed, Bennie made no effort to conceal his purpose,—that he wanted to shake the dust of humble Hurdleford from his shoes and go forth to make name and fame for himself in Chicago or New York or Paris. The only thing that Hurdleford had against him, aside from his close relationship to Mr. and Mrs. Absalom Jaggard, was his ambition to become an artist. Solid, substantial Hurdleford could think of nothing more shameful than the readiness of an able-bodied male to become an author or an artist. In this respect, at least, the older residents of the town were in accord with Absalom, who desired his son to become a lawyer, notwithstanding his wife's stubborn resolve to make a painter, a musician or a poet out of him.

She died shortly after her son came out of college and had begun to "read law" in the office of Playden & Crouse, the leading attorneys in Hurdleford, preliminary to a course in a Chicago law-school. Absalom, temporarily at least, had had his way. He had shown his wife and the world that he was going to make a lawyer of Bennie whether he liked it or not. Mrs. Jaggard left her boy something over ten thousand dollars in her will, an amount sufficient to alter destiny for him, as will be seen. Less than a year after her death he informed his father that he was through with the law, withdrew from the office of Playden & Crouse, announced his intention to take up art, and ran away with Barbara Wayne,

—the most incredible thing of all when it is explained that no one in Hurdleford even suspected that the young people were in love with each other.

Indeed, up to the time of the elopement, they were supposed to include themselves in the family feud to such an extent that they never spoke to each other. After the event, however, there were persons who remembered seeing them together in out-of-the-way places, and there was a revival of the story that Bennie and Barbara Wayne had been childhood sweethearts.

And now Bennie Jaggard was back in town and he had come without Shelby Wayne's daughter. Food for speculation, conjecture and—apprehension. What had become of Barbara? Bennie's return could be accounted for, but why had he left her behind?

All Hurdleford knew that Absalom Jaggard was on his death-bed. He had been in failing health for months and now the end was near,—a few weeks off, it was said. But what Hurdleford could not understand was this: if Absalom's son had come home to make peace with his father, why had not Barbara taken a similar step in substantially the same direction? It was all very queer. A great many heads in Hurdleford were being shaken that afternoon and night.

Young Jaggard did not repair at once to the house on the hill. He went direct to the office of Dr. Higgs. This gave rise to the opinion that the family physician had written to tell Absalom's son that his father was dying,—he may even have transmitted a promise of forgiveness from the sick man on the hill. Citizens who saw and spoke to Bennie were responsible for the report that the young man seemed to be as fastidious as ever when it came to the garments he wore but there was no getting away from the fact that he looked seedy in other respects. It occurred to these observers that he was not so good-looking, nor was he by any means as self-important as he was before he went away.

No one inquired about Barbara Wayne. Something

seemed to tell them that inquiries were likely to prove embarrassing. In any case, the subject was a tender one, all things considered.

Bennie was tall and dark and, after a fashion, handsome. He was like his mother, a finer animal than either of his Jaggard forebears. They were raw-boned, flat-cheeked, thin-lipped men, with narrow gray eyes set far back in their sockets under what may be described as Mephistophelean eyebrows; low foreheads crowned by coarse, straight black hair; long-legged men who stooped slightly and shuffled as they walked. He was as straight as an arrow, lithe and graceful, warm-skinned, brown-eyed, wavy-haired, with full, sensuous lips that never parted when he smiled.

Hurdleford was inquisitive and thrilled, but it was never to know what passed between Dr. Higgs and young Jaggard in the former's office. The doctor was expecting the young man. He greeted him warmly.

"I'm glad to see you, Bennie," said the old man, gripping his visitor's hand. "I was afraid you might still be on your high horse and refuse to come when I wrote to tell you how sick your father is."

"Has he asked for me?" inquired Bennie, anxiously.

The doctor shook his head. "No, he hasn't. He's as hard as nails, my lad. I took a chance on his giving in when he saw you. You didn't bring Barbara with you, did you?"

Jaggard suddenly averted his gaze. "No, Dr. Higgs, I—I didn't."

"It's just as well," said the other, after a moment. "He hates her."

"How is he?"

Both were standing.

"Sit down, Bennie," said the doctor. "Your father is not going to get well," he went on after a pause. "I give him a couple of weeks, maybe less. Bright's Disease."

A spasm passed over Bennie's face. His clenched hands rested on his knees.

"Do you think he will see me?" he asked, huskily.

"I have not told him that you were on the way here. I thought it best to wait until you arrived. He doesn't know that I wrote to you. If there is anything I can do to straighten out this terrible business, Bennie, I want to do it. He hates the Waynes,—all of them,—Barbara worse than the rest. I will not say that he hates you, my boy. I can't see how he could, his own child. But he is a strange man. His father was a strange man. You know, I suppose, that your grandpa did not—er—fancy your mother."

"Yes, I know. He hated my mother."

"And she hated him. But they're both dead. We don't need to consider them," he said, dismissing them with professional callousness. "You hurt your father terribly when you ran off with Barbara Wayne."

"I have an idea that Mr. Wayne was pretty much put out, too."

"I don't quite see why there should be so much feeling between the two families—but there is and we can't get away from it. Shelby Wayne has said he would rather see his daughter dead than married to a Jaggard. I can't understand this. I guess I'll have to call it venom. Still, there's no use guessing. The fact remains."

"I could tell you what it is, Dr. Higgs, but it wouldn't be fair," said Bennie. "I know what the trouble is,—and so does Barbara. It goes back a long way, that's all I will say. Long before my father or Shelby Wayne were born. Don't ask me, because I'll never tell."

"It's none of my business," said the doctor, curtly. "The point is this, my boy. Your father is dying. I'd like to see you reconciled to each other, if that is possible. I wrote you that he altered his will soon after you went away. It still stands. I was a witness to it. Judge Playden drew it up. As I said to you in my letter last month, he disowns you as his son. It's all very legal. Judge Playden says it cannot be broken. Your father leaves you the sum of one

hundred dollars, not as his son, but as the son of your mother, to whom he was devoted. I don't know whether you realize how much your father is worth."

"I know it amounts to a great deal, doctor. But I am not thinking of that, sir. I am thinking of him. I want him to forgive me."

"I appreciate that, my lad. Understand me, I am not condoning your act in running off as you did, knowing the hatred that existed between the two families. I suppose you couldn't help it, either one of you. You were in love and nothing else mattered. But that's neither here nor there. The thing was done, so that's all there is to it. The Jaggard estate will be worth over a million dollars, Bennie. Your father has left every dollar of it to various charitable concerns. The church comes in for a lot. A new hospital is to be built here in Hurdleford, equipped and endowed. The Orphans' Home over in Radley is to be a beneficiary. His farmers are all to have stipulated amounts. His lands are to be sold, converted into cash, so to speak. There are nearly three thousand acres in this county, the finest farming and grazing land in the state. After all this has been attended to by the trustees, there will not be a dollar of money, not a foot of land in the name of Jaggard,—that is except the little burying ground on the side of the hill where your grandparents and your mother lie, and where your father is to be buried. Strange notion, your grandfather had. He wanted to be buried in a graveyard in which none but Jaggards ever were to be interred. You knew that, of course."

Bennie gave vent to a short, bitter, little laugh.

"I suppose I am barred," he said.

"That rests with you. I remember your grandfather saying more than once that no matter what evil a Jaggard may have done while he was alive, he was as good as anybody else when he was dead. Now as for breaking the news to your father. I must insist that I prepare him for your visit. He

is not expecting you. If you were to go to him without warning I fear the result would be fatal. Leave it to me. Now that you are actually here I can go to him with the news. I cannot guarantee that he will see you. I'll do my best. Stay here in the house, Bennie. I will telephone to you later on."

The old doctor did not ask a single question about Barbara. Without more ado he left the office and started for the house on the hill. A few minutes after his departure, Mrs. Higgs came into the office,—the front room of the house in which the doctor had lived and practiced for forty years. She found the young man pacing the floor, his hands clenched behind his back, a dark frown on his face. He greeted her eagerly if shyly, seeming in doubt as to the manner in which she would receive him. His relief was pronounced when she grasped his hands and kissed him heartily. Presently he was sitting down, talking to her, nervously, jerkily, somewhat abstractedly.

"How is Barbara Lee?" she asked, suddenly. A great many people, including her own family, called the girl Barbara Lee.

"Barbara? Oh, she's fine."

"Did you leave her in New York?"

"I came alone, Mrs. Higgs. In a hurry, you see," he answered, evasively. "How—how is Mr. Wayne? How are the boys?" he asked, putting the question he had been eager to ask ever since his arrival.

"They're well. Mr. Wayne is just the same. He still drives his horses, even in these days of the automobile. You know the kind of horses he has. Fine ones, thoroughbreds. He would have good horses if he didn't have five cents to his name. He——"

"How are George and Tom?" he broke in. "Still around here?"

"Oh, yes. And not married. People say that Tom is

engaged to Stella Davidson. I don't know. I am a little out of it, you see. Getting old, Bennie, getting old. George is going with Kate Smith now. She is the latest, I believe. Time those boys were getting married."

"Yes," said Bennie, absently.

"They're old enough. George must be twenty-eight. Tom's about a year older than you, isn't he? They're doing very well, too, in their business."

"They're still partners?"

"Oh, my, yes. They've made it pay, too. People thought they wouldn't, being young and all. They run the biggest and best garage in Hurdleford now, and they're agents for several automobiles. Think of that! Two boys brought up on horses, training automobiles how to behave to-day! Feeding automobiles on gasoline instead of providing blue grass for horses! How the world goes!"

"Do they live in town?"

"They're still on the farm with their father. Only takes them six or seven minutes to run out there in a car. Two miles is nothing to a Ford car, Bennie,—or any other kind of a car, for that matter. Mr. Wayne runs the place, with the help of a farmer. Goodness knows, he couldn't run it himself, still being a gentleman of the old school, as the saying is. The Waynes boast that there never has been a member of the family who worked for anybody else, except Barbara, and that didn't amount to much. They go back two hundred years or more and in all that time not one of them has ever been under another man, except in the war. I guess maybe they had to be under a general then. I'll be honest with you, Bennie. Since Barbara left home the way she did, the boys feel they ought to stay with their father. Maybe that's what keeps them from getting married. I don't know."

Bennie was silent for a few moments, staring hard at the floor. His jaw was set, his lips compressed.

"Do they ever speak of their sister, Mrs. Higgs?" he

asked, abruptly, looking up from the carpet, a queer, almost wistful expression in his eyes.

Mrs. Higgs hesitated. "As far as I know, Bennie, they've never spoken of her since she went away. That is, in public. They were very fond of her, you know,—and they were proud of her. Nobody ever mentions her to them, for that matter. I guess people are afraid to do it."

"I see. The boys think I'm not good enough for their sister, I understand. It doesn't matter that I went to college and stood to come in for a lot of money. They think I'm not good enough for a Wayne. That's it. Well," he went on, almost angrily, "we'll see. We'll see whether a Wayne is any better than a Jaggard." A dull red spread over his face.

"What do you mean, Bennie?"

"Oh,—nothing," replied the young man, shrugging his shoulders.

Afterwards she recalled his words and his manner. For the moment, however, she attributed his bitterness to a natural revolt against the slight, imagined or otherwise, that the Waynes had put upon his pride.

"Do you think my father will see me, Mrs. Higgs?" he went on, his face clouding.

"I am sure he will, Bennie," she answered, soothingly. "Don't you worry. Dr. Higgs will fix it."

She remembered that old Benjamin Jaggard had had no pride. On the other hand, to her way of thinking, Absalom, his son, mistook resentment for injured pride, in which case a reconciliation would be much more easily effected than even her husband believed possible. What she did not know, however, was that Absalom could be hurt by the scorn of the Waynes. Old Benjamin could not be hurt by them because he knew that he was "poor white trash." The poignancy of Absalom's rancor was infinitely greater than his father's ever could have been, for he had grown up with

rebellion in his soul against the so-called social law that made the Jaggards "dirt under the feet" of the Waynes,—a harsh verdict once pronounced for his benefit by the horse-thief's son. Old Benjamin had not despised the Waynes; Absalom did. He had climbed just that much higher up the ladder of civilization than his father had crept before him. He could hate his betters. Strange anomaly, but he considered it degrading for a son of his to ascend even farther at the expense of a family who looked down upon him.

"How are you getting along with your work, Bennie?" inquired the old lady. "Still studying art, as the saying is?"

"Yes, I'm painting, Mrs. Higgs," he answered, a new light coming into his eyes. "I think I'm getting on pretty well, too. Some of the things I've done lately are— But, you wouldn't care to hear about them."

"Indeed I would, Bennie. Go on. Tell me."

For ten minutes he ran on eagerly, almost wistfully about his work in the Art Students' League and his subsequent progress. His good-looking face lighted up, his dark eyes glowed with enthusiasm.

"I'll get on in the world, Mrs. Higgs, even though father doesn't leave me a penny," he was saying when the telephone bell rang. "That's Dr. Higgs," he broke off sharply, starting up. "He said he'd telephone as soon as he had talked with father."

Mrs. Higgs took down the receiver. It was some one asking the doctor to run in and see a sick child as soon as possible.

"It's a little too soon for him to have talked the situation over with your father," she said to Bennie, after jotting the call down on a pad. "He will have to go about it carefully. Your father's heart is bad."

"Oh, Lord, it's—it's terrible, isn't it, Mrs. Higgs?" he burst out, wretchedly. "Poor father! I—I——"

"There, there, now!" she murmured, gently. She could not help loving this boy, she could not help mothering him. She was a kind, generous soul, so she was content to forget that not so many months ago he had "put on airs" and rather looked down upon Hurdleford and all its people. "Your coming may be the very thing that will give him the strength and courage to—to get well."

"Dr. Higgs says he can't get well. He said so in his letter."

"Doctors sometimes can be mistaken," said she, shaking her head. "Doctor Higgs will tell you he has made some pretty bad guesses in his time." This was in a sense disloyal, but she took comfort in the conviction that honesty, in this case at least, was serving a purpose. "How about Barbara?" she asked bluntly. "Does she like it in New York? Bohemia, they call it, I believe."

She loved Barbara Lee Wayne.

"Oh, she's well," said Bennie, looking out of the window. "She likes it there."

"Has she a baby?"

He flushed darkly, opened his mouth to answer, and then abruptly arose and crossed to the east window, where he stood looking out into the yard, his back to her.

In a flash Mrs. Higgs realized what had happened. She had touched upon a raw spot. Barbara had lost her baby.

"I am sorry, Bennie," she cried out impulsively. "I didn't know. And me blurting out a question like that. I ought to be killed. Forgive me, boy. I lost a baby,—my first. We couldn't talk about it for months. I am dreadfully sorry for both of you."

He continued to gaze out of the window for a long time, his shoulders hunched as if in expectation of a blow from behind. The telephone bell rang sharply, breaking the tension. Mrs. Higgs answered.

"The doctor wants to speak to you, Bennie," she said.

The conversation with Dr. Higgs was brief.

"I am to come up to the house at once," Bennie announced. "May I telephone for a car to take me up, Mrs. Higgs?"

"Certainly. Try Main 397. They'll send a car."

He stopped short in the act of taking down the receiver.

"That's not the Wayne boys' place, is it?" he demanded.

"No. Donovan's garage."

Ten minutes later he was on his way to the house on the hill. As the car sped down Center street on the way to the bridge, he sat rigidly beside the chauffeur, looking straight ahead. All the time he wondered if either of Barbara's brothers was staring at him from the sidewalk.

CHAPTER THREE

ABSALOM RECEIVES HIS SON

ABSALOM,—“My son Absalom,” old Benjamin had named him, harking back in the darkness of a native ignorance to the one story in the Bible that had impressed itself upon him as had no other portion of that holy history,—Absalom Jaggard received his son late that afternoon, and was rewarded. He died a fortnight later in comparative tranquillity, prouder than he ever had been before in his life. For he died knowing that his son had seduced and abandoned a daughter of the Waynes! He was proud of that.

Over the protests of Dr. Higgs he finally insisted on seeing his son alone. For some time the doctor sought to convince him that the least excitement, the slightest emotion, might prove fatal to him, but he was adamant. He would receive his prodigal son alone or not at all.

“You can wait in the hall, Doc,” he decided. His voice was strong, his eyes were brighter than they had been in weeks. “I don’t want you or any one else to see me turn him out of my house, if it should be necessary, and I don’t want you to be here if I break down and whimper over him.”

“You’ve simply got to control your temper, Absalom,” warned the physician. “If you fly off the handle——”

“If I need you, I’ll call,” broke in the sick man, shortly.

“He has come to ask you to forgive him, you know.”

Absalom grinned, showing his stained, uneven teeth.

“I will believe that when he gets down on his knees and promises me one thing.”

“He’ll never promise that, Absalom,” said the other, shaking his head.

"Anyhow, I'll give him the chance," said Jaggard, closing his eyes. "Send him in."

Bennie and his father did not shake hands. Purposely the latter kept his arms under the blanket that covered his long, thin body. He was lying on the bed, partly propped up by pillows. Bennie, shocked by his father's appearance, hesitated just inside the door after closing it. Then he advanced swiftly to the bedside.

"I've come back, Father," he began, huskily. "I am terribly sorry to see you in——"

"They say I'm going to die," broke in the sick man, hurrying the words. He was looking at his son through narrowed lids. To have opened them wide would have been to reveal relief and gladness, and that he would not do. "I suppose Doc Higgs told you that. That's why you're here. Well? What have you to say for yourself?"

Hard,—as hard as granite! A curious, dazzling anger blinded Bennie. His impulse was to turn on his heel and rush out of the room without another word and to leave the house forever. The spasm of rage gave way immediately to shame and a sort of self-abasement. For the first time he realized how deeply he had wounded his father a year and a half ago. Up to this instant he had thought only of himself and his own affairs; he had not cared much one way or the other how his father and Shelby Wayne felt about what they might be pleased to call the treachery of their children. He and Barbara had snapped their fingers at their commanders in the bitter war between the two factions; they had laughed a little over the trick they were playing on their unsuspecting fathers. Not for an instant did they expect to be forgiven for the defection, and most certainly they would not make any appeal for themselves. They considered themselves above all that. Let their fathers do the pleading. If they truly loved their children, that is just what they would do.

Now, in a flash, Bennie understood why his father had

never begged him to come home, now he knew why Shelby Wayne had ignored his only daughter. They had been betrayed. By their own flesh and blood they had been humbled.

"I have come back to make my peace with you, father," said Bennie, abjectly.

"Where is she?" demanded Absalom. "Has she come back to make peace with her father?"

"No. She is in New York." Then with an effort: "At least she was the last time I saw her."

"What's this? The last time you saw her? What do you mean?"

"I mean,—just that."

Absalom Jaggard opened his eyes as he raised himself from the pillows.

"Do you mean that—that she has left you?" he demanded, his deep-set eyes seeming to sink farther back into their shadowy caverns.

His son took a deep breath; he swallowed hard as if something had stuck in his throat.

"We are not living together. That's all over, father. Some time ago."

"Is—is she getting a divorce from you?" asked the old man, after a moment, something like dismay in his eyes. "She—she has found out that you are not good enough for her? Does she think she has married beneath her after—after running away with you like that?"

"She is not getting a divorce from me," said his son, sitting down suddenly at the foot of the bed. His face was dripping. "We were never married, sir."

His father lay perfectly still for a long time, his lower lip sagging.

"You—you didn't marry her?" he inquired stupidly, his eyebrows almost meeting in a bewildered frown. "Say that again, boy."

"We didn't get married."

"And—and you lived together?" He raised himself higher in the bed.

"I refuse to answer that question, sir," said Bennie, steadily.

"I see. You figure it wouldn't be fair, eh? Well, I'm glad you're that much of a man. You might have bragged about it, being a low-down Jaggard."

He was breathing rapidly; the corners of his mouth began to twitch with the smile that was trying to take form.

"I am not going to say a word against Barbara. I'll die first," cried Bennie, his voice rising.

"Don't get excited. I'm not asking you to say a word against her, am I? All I ask is for you to answer a question or two. You can do that, can't you? Well, she did go away with you, didn't she?" There was an eager, even persuasive note in his voice. His eyes were gleaming.

"We left Hurdleford together," answered his son, gruffly. "You know that. Everybody knows that."

"Yes, I know. You were kind enough to leave a note behind," sardonically. "You went east together?"

"Of course. Now, listen, father! I won't say anything more than that we are not married. And, what's more, we're not living together now. She——"

"Answer me this. Did that girl ever think she was married to you?"

"No, she didn't."

"You mean, she—well, say, answer me this," he went on jerkily. "Did she expect you to marry her?"

"I suppose she did."

"You—you promised you would?"

"What difference does that make?" demanded Bennie, harshly. "I'm telling you we didn't get married, am I not? Well, that's enough, isn't it? It doesn't matter whether I promised or not." He paused for a moment and then blurted out, as if suddenly finding a way to vindicate himself and to justify his presence there. "You don't suppose

I'd be here now without her if she was my wife, do you? Don't make any mistake about that, sir. I wouldn't come sneaking home like this if she was still with me. Not much! I'd stick to my part of the bargain. I couldn't go back on her if she was my wife. The reason I've come back to see you for a day or two is because I'm free to do as I please, and because I heard you were very ill. That's why. I suppose she'd come back too if she heard Mr. Wayne was—er—ahem!"

"Say it! Dying, that's the word."

"Very ill," substituted Bennie, in lowered tones. "I don't know anything about her, however. We're through, that's all."

He said it defiantly, almost as if challenging reproach.

His father eyed him for a few seconds. He seemed afraid to ask the next question.

"Did she leave you or did you leave her?" he finally forced himself to say.

"I must decline to answer that question. It isn't fair."

Absalom was thinking. A cunning twinkle stole into his eyes; something like unholy glee sounded in the chuckle that finally broke from his lips.

"I understand. You don't have to answer that question. But you might just as well come right out and say you took her off with you and deserted her. If she had left you, you wouldn't hesitate to tell me. Good! I'm satisfied. I wouldn't be surprised if I should die happy after all. We Jaggards have dragged one of them damned Waynes down into the mud."

"Good God, sir! Is that anything to be proud of?" cried Bennie, staring.

"You bet it is!" almost shouted Absalom. "It's something to have made a prostitute of one of 'em, isn't it? That's what she is,—that's what she is. I hope you left her in the gutter. I hope she's gone to the bad altogether. I hope——"

"Father!"

But Absalom exulted. "Oh, if your mother could only know what you've done to that girl! If God will only let her look down from heaven and see what's happened to that high-toned——"

"Father! You must not talk like this. You ought to feel sorry for her. You ought to——"

"Sorry for her? Sorry for a damned, overbearing Wayne? Ha! The blue-blooded Waynes! Ha! I guess their blood ain't any better than ours. Look down on us, will they? Ha! Look down on us from the gutter, eh? That's a high place for anybody to look down on other people."

His voice trailed off into a weak, hoarse whisper. He put his hand to his throat.

Bennie's first thought was to cry out in protest against this astonishing diatribe. It was on the tip of his tongue to shout:

"If there's going to be any looking down done, the Waynes will do it. I am the one to be scorned."

But he checked the words. He was terrified by the look in his father's eyes.

"Don't get excited, father," he cried as he sprang to the bedside. "My God! It's—it's come! I'll call Dr. Higgs! I'll——"

He started for the door, frantic with alarm. His father called out to him, his voice suddenly strong and clear.

"Come back here!"

"I'm going to call Dr. Higgs——"

"Stop! Do you hear me! Don't call the doctor. I'm all right. I'm cool. I'm stronger. Look! I can sit up. Sit down there by the window. Don't talk. I won't talk either for a while. Sit there where I can look at you. I just want to think. I want to get this thing straight in my mind. Confound you! Do as I tell you, sir!"

Bennie obeyed. He was trembling like a leaf. Sitting down on the edge of a chair, he fixed his apprehensive,

uneasy gaze upon the gaunt face of his father. A minute, two minutes, ten minutes passed without a word being spoken. Absalom's eyes were half shut. His thin lips, drawn tight, had settled into a sort of sardonic grin. It seemed an hour to Bennie before those white lids were lifted and the old man's eyes met his.

"I am quiet now, Bennie. I promise not to get excited again. From now on I'll be cool. All I ask now is for you to say that you've told me the God's truth," he said quietly.

"My chief reason for coming home was to tell you this," said his son, looking down.

"You've—you've turned her adrift?"

"If you care to put it that way."

Then Absalom said a remarkable thing.

"You are a good boy, Bennie," he murmured, his voice so low the words were barely audible. His eyes were almost tender.

Bennie began pacing the floor, his hands clasped behind his back, his lips compressed. The sick man watched him narrowly, perhaps a little anxiously.

"See here, father," said the former, halting suddenly. "What I've just said must be sacred. It's between you and me. It's not to go any farther."

"What do you mean?"

"I don't want any one to know about—about Barbara. I owe her that much. She trusted me. She went away with me. She's been square with me. The only decent thing for me to do, and the only decent thing for you as my father to do, is to keep our mouths shut. If she chooses to tell, all well and good. But if she wants to keep still about it, I'd be a dirty dog to blab."

Absalom stared.

"Oh, you'd be a dirty dog, would you?" sneeringly.

"Yes. Maybe I'm that already. Anyhow, it's nothing to brag about."

"Humph! If it was the other way about, the Waynes

wouldn't be so damned generous. They'd shout it from the housetops if you were a girl and one of the Wayne boys had——"

"They would do nothing of the sort," broke in Bennie. "And you know it. They're not that sort. They're gentlemen. They'd let their tongues be cut out before they'd say a word against a woman, and you know it. For God's sake, why can't we be as decent as the Waynes?"

"Decent?" gasped the old man.

"Yes,—decent," exclaimed Bennie, fiercely.

"You—you mean we're not to let anybody know what kind of a girl she is?"

"It must not come from us, that's all."

Absalom sagged down among the pillows. His triumph was slipping away from him.

"You don't think a Wayne would tell?"

"It wouldn't be possible, sir."

His father was silent for a long time. When he spoke there was dreariness in his voice.

"I guess maybe you're right. I hate them but—but I guess you're right about them letting their tongue be cut out. Go away now. Leave me alone for a while. I want to think this thing out for myself. I—I want to try and figure out just what I'd do if I was a Wayne instead of a Jaggard."

"You would let your tongue be cut out if you were a Wayne. You'd let it be cut out if you were me," said his son, boldly.

"It seems a pity," murmured Absalom, and Bennie knew what was in his mind.

"Shall I ask Doctor Higgs to come in?"

"Not just yet. I don't need a doctor."

"All right, sir. But remember, I've asked you not to repeat a word of what I've said,—not even to Dr. Higgs."

"Come back in half an hour or so. We haven't shaken hands yet, Bennie. No! Not yet! In half an hour I may

shake hands with you, but not yet. Come back later on. Wait! Don't ask for anything to eat. You're not to touch food in my house till I say so. Understand? And say, don't let that infernal nurse come in here either."

His son bowed his head and went out. As the door closed quickly behind him, he began to cry. He staggered blindly down the hall, one hand pressed to his mouth in the hopeless effort to stifle the sobs. Dr. Higgs, seated on the bottom step of the stairs some distance away, scrambled to his feet and hurried up to the young man.

"Don't take on like this, Bennie," he began, laying his hand on the other's shoulder, which was heaving convulsively. "Brace up! We——"

"Oh, God! I am so ashamed! I am so ashamed!" sobbed Bennie, covering his eyes with his forearm.

"Now, now, my boy,—it will be all right. He'll forgive you for——"

"I'll never forgive myself,—never! What a filthy black-guard I am."

"Run along downstairs," urged the doctor, gently. "Have a good cry. It will do you good. Don't try to talk. Just have it out. I'll step in and see your father."

Bennie grasped the doctor's arm, holding him back while he struggled for control of himself.

"Don't go in," he managed to say. "He doesn't want to see you yet. He wants to be alone."

Dr. Higgs started. "See here! What has happened to him? Are you hiding anything——"

"No, no, no!" burst from Bennie's lips. "I am telling you the truth. He seems calm. But he told me not to allow him to be disturbed by any one for a little while."

The doctor, pursing his lips, nodded gravely. "I see. But your voices were raised a little while ago. Sounded like a quarrel. It wasn't that, was it?"

The young man started. There was a flash of alarm in his eyes.

"Not exactly," he made haste to say. "Simply a difference of opinion, that's all. He—that's why he wants to be alone. He wants to think the whole thing out for himself."

"It's none of my business, Bennie, unless you will concede me the family doctor's right to be nosey, but does he show any signs of relenting? He was very bitter, you know."

"I don't know, doctor," replied Bennie, after blowing his nose violently. His eyes were still wet and the look of alarm had left them. After a moment's hesitation he added ironically: "He doesn't seem to be as bitter as he was."

"Good! That's something. That's progress."

"He thinks better of me than he did," said the young man, a queer smile twisting his lips.

The doctor rubbed his hands. "Now if we could only make Shelby Wayne see things as your father is beginning to see them, we might all be happy again."

Bennie shook his head. His face twitched curiously for an instant. Then he said:

"That would not be possible, Dr. Higgs."

"You mean about being happy again? Nonsense!"

Jaggard did not reply to this. He looked at his watch, longer than was necessary even though the dusk of evening had penetrated to the hall.

"He said to come back in half an hour. I think I'll go out on the porch and smoke. Will you join me?"

"No, thanks," said the doctor, conscious of an intentional rebuff. Humph! He hadn't changed much, this Jaggard boy! College ways, college superiority. Stuck up! Humph!

From the recessed side-porch, a view of the low-lying, far-stretching plain was to be had through the sparse cedars. The sun was sinking below the rim of earth over in the western sky, a fiery red ball pasted upon a surface of bluish white. In the distance to the eastward, walling in the earth, was the inevitable fringe of woodland; in the foreground

there were stripped wheatfields and endless rows of corn shocks; cropped and colorless squares from which the hay had been taken, green pasture-lands with clumps of willows here and there shading the creek which wound through the Jaggard farms. Below at the base of the long slope stood the little home of the Waynes, stuck away among a few dusty, shabby oaks. Wagons moved haltingly through the cornfields, where men were husking. One of these wagons now was nearing the home of the Waynes, two men walking alongside of it.

Bennie wondered if one of them was Barbara's father. No; Shelby Wayne would not be doing that sort of work.

Pacing the porch restlessly, smoking cigarette after cigarette, he never failed to direct his gaze through that particular gap in the cedars which clearly revealed the little house at the bottom of the hill. As a small boy, he had looked down from the porch or from the garden beyond at the house where lived the envied little Waynes; as a youth and later as a lover he had looked down upon the habitation of the still envied Waynes. To him, a lonely boy, it was a fairy palace. *Her* home, the home of those secretly admired brothers, the home that was bright and gay and full of laughter; and always he had wished, without actually being aware of it, that his home was like theirs, that his home was as full of life. He had been a hungry little boy, an even hungrier youth, and they had something down there in that humble home that was being denied him: a feast of companionship and love.

He did not love his father. Ever since he was old enough to speculate on such things, he had wondered if his mother loved him. Somehow,—and he did not mean to be disloyal,—he felt that his mother was better than the Jaggards. *She* was of a different breed, a different class; that was only too apparent to him, as it must have been to others less concerned than he. He had always respected his father, per-

haps tolerantly; he might have feared him if his mother had not been his unfaltering defender in times of stress.

Absalom Jaggard had been brought up not so much in the fear of God as in the fear of his father. He believed that to be the only way to bring up a son, for he beheld in himself an example of strict and rigorous measures. His own father, according to his lights, had made a man of him, a good, solid and prosperous man; he had made a man out of material that he himself had scorned, for old Benjamin had never deceived himself when it came to the quality of dirt the Jaggards were made of; in spite of all this, he had made a good man of his only son Absalom. He had forced him to go to school, he had sent him to Sunday school, he had ordered him to believe in God; but he had given him neither too much in the shape of education nor too much in the way of religion. Too much of either, said old Benjamin, is sure to make a fool of a man. Learn how to read and write and "figger" and you can pick up all the knowledge there is in the world as you go along; read the Bible through once and "foller out" the Ten Commandments and you've got as much religion as the Pope himself. He didn't take much stock in the admonition to "honor thy father and thy mother that thy days may be long upon the yearth." What's the sense of honorin' either of 'em if they don't deserve it, and most of 'em don't, said old Benjamin. Honor yourself, said he, and your father and mother, no matter what they are, will honor you, which is the way it had ought to be. The only way to bring up a boy or a girl, said he, was first of all to show 'em that God put 'em into the world to be brought up by somebody else; which was the chief reason why he gave 'em parents, to begin with,—'specially a father.

And that was Absalom's notion, too. It wasn't young Benjamin's, however, and there was the rub. He allowed his father to see that he very much preferred being "brought

up" by his mother, whose ideals were loftier and therefore to be attained without anything like the struggle his misdirected father had been forced to make. To say that Absalom had not been proud of his son would be false, notwithstanding the young man's incredible desire to become an artist. To say that Bennie was proud of his father would be equally as false. He was, nevertheless, far from being proud of his grandfather, whose father had been strung up for stealing the horses of the Waynes.

But he did believe his father was a good man; he respected him and now he pitied him. He was dying. After all he was his father, and he was dying. He knew he would not, nor could he, feel as deeply about his death as he did when his tender, always adored mother passed away. He was in an agony of suspense while she lay between life and death, and he had hoped,—oh, how he had hoped! He still mourned her. Now his father was dying. It was not the same. Strangely, it was not the same. He was not hoping.

In the gathering gloom of early evening he stood at the porch rail, staring down at the patch of oaks. A thin blue plume of smoke from the kitchen chimney rose above the tops of trees and floated away into nothingness. Cows were lowing plaintively; somewhere a man gave the familiar call to scattered pigs; martins and chimney-swallows dipped and darted in their wild, crazy flight above and beyond the cedars; lights suddenly appeared in two windows of the Wayne home,—the kitchen and dining-room, he well remembered. Hundreds of times he had watched for the lights to burst forth in those darkened windows. Night had been coming, night was here. A clock in the silent house struck seven. He drew a deep breath, straightened his shoulders and went in. The half-hour was up.

His father's room was quite dark. He could see the bed dimly in the waning light that struggled in from the day that was dying too.

"Don't turn on the lights," spoke his father out of the shadows. His voice was firm, even steady.

"It's pretty dark, father."

"Yes, I know. Come over here and sit down on the bed beside me, Benjamin. That's right. Here is my hand, boy. We'll—we'll shake."

As Bennie grasped the huge, bony hand in his own, he experienced a curious, indescribable thrill. Never before had his father's hand felt like this, never before had it gripped his like this,—strong and warm and unlike any other hand-clasp he had ever known. Some instinct told him it was the hand-clasp of a father who loved and was no longer timid or on his guard lest his son should find him out and think him weak and unmanly.

Presently Absalom said: "You said something about staying for a couple of days. Is there any reason now why you can't stay here till the end?"

"I shan't leave you, father," replied his son, huskily.

"That's good. Up to now I didn't mind dying all alone, but as things have turned out I'd kind of hate it if no one belonging to me was with me. You see, Bennie, except for you, I've got nobody else. And when I'm gone, you'll be the only Jaggard living so far as I know. Your grandpa didn't have any brothers or sisters. He spoke of a couple of uncles of his and an aunt or two, but God only knows what's become of their families. Dead long ago, I reckon. Maybe their offspring, if they had any, are still living somewhere down there in the South. Poor whites. Yes, you stay on here for a while. Don't let me die all alone. Seeing as you don't have to go back to anybody in the East, I guess it ain't asking much. Have your trunk sent up here to the house and bring your suitcase. You can sleep in your old room. We have supper at seven o'clock usually, but it'll be late to-night. Just step to the door, will you, and tell that nurse to bring me my tray when it's ready. It's Eva Joslin. God, it's awful, being so helpless that I have to

be waited on by a woman. I can't seem to get used to it. I never had a woman do anything for me in all my life and I'm nearly seventy years old. Not even my mother."

"So,—so I am to stay here, father?" asked Bennie, after a pause. "You really want me?"

"I do. It's all right now. What you told me a while ago makes a lot of difference. I never would have forgiven you if you hadn't got rid of that girl the way you did. I allowed you to come here so as I could tell you face to face before I die that I was through with you. I guess maybe I thought I'd get some satisfaction out of it. But you surprised me. You knocked the wind out of my sails. I wish you'd just say it all over again. I'd like to hear you say you got rid of Barbara Wayne the same as if she was nothing more'n——"

"Please, father!" begged his son.

"All right, I won't ask," said Absalom, resignedly. "Push on the light now, Bennie, and ask the nurse to feed me. She feeds me, you see, same as you'd feed a hog. Feeding time, that's what I call it. Yes, I wish your ma was alive and could know what I know. By glory, I wish Shelby Wayne could know it too."

"He is never to know," exclaimed Bennie, quickly. "Not from us, in any case."

"It spoils everything," sighed Absalom.

His son gave directions to the sour-looking nurse and came back into the room.

"I forgot to ask," said his father, shading his eyes with his hand. "Barbara didn't have a baby, did she?"

"No, sir."

(This was the truth and yet not quite the truth; Barbara's baby was not expected for several months.)

"In a way I'm sorry, 'cause that would have made her downfall complete. Then again, I'm mighty glad. There won't be any child of her'n to step in some time and claim a right to my property."

Bennie started. His eyes narrowed slightly.

"I don't quite understand you," he ventured, but he *did* understand perfectly.

Absalom chuckled. "I guess maybe you never knowed that I made a new will after you went away. Well, I did, and I fixed it so that you and that Wayne girl was to have almost nothing. Yes, I cut you out of it, Bennie, except for a small sum to meet legal requirements."

"I supposed you would disinherit me, father. You were quite right too. I don't deserve a penny."

"Better say you didn't deserve a penny. Things are different now. You're back in the family again and I'm glad to call you son. I'll have to change my will again, I reckon. Not right away, so don't feel too sure. I'll take my time. I don't change my mind in a minute,—no, not in a day or a week. I'm going to use it to think with for a while yet. A man that changes his mind without thinking for quite a spell hasn't got much of a mind to begin with. Come in!"

In response to his call, the nurse entered with his tray, followed by Dr. Higgs.

"Go down and have your supper, Bennie," said the sick man. "I won't see you again till morning. I'm going to settle down and have a good long sleep, the first I've had in many a night. It's all right, Doc. You needn't look so solemn. I feel like a—like a fighting cock."

Benjamin Jaggard slept in his old room that night, but he would not have known it. Nothing, not even the smallest article of furniture, had been left there to remind his father of him who had occupied it for years. It had been turned into a spare room, and a bare one at that. The four walls and the ceiling were the same, and the view from the windows, but apart from these immovable features the transformation was complete and deliberate. Sardonic evidence of the sentence that had been passed.

The better part of a fortnight went by before Absalom

sent for Judge Playden, the family lawyer. He was ready at last to make a new and final will. He was convinced that his son was worthy, satisfied in his mind that Bennie deserved the Jaggard fortune. He would have insisted on certain restrictions and somewhat drastic disclosures being embodied in the document had he been in full possession of his health, but he was tired and surprisingly indifferent to things that once would have mattered. For days he was stubbornly, doggedly resolved on proclaiming to the world by means of this final document the shame of Barbara Wayne: a plain declaration that his son and heir was not and never had been the husband of Shelby Wayne's daughter. At first he threatened to allow the original will to stand, virtually disinheriting his son, rather than be deprived of the satisfaction of striking hard and triumphantly at the pride of the Waynes, even though he himself would be dead and unable to enjoy the fruits of such a victory.

But Bennie refused to accept a dollar under such conditions. His stand was so resolute and so unyielding that in the end old Absalom gave in, faced by the singular alternative of the father being disowned by his son instead of the other way about. For Bennie made it very plain that he would renounce the fortune if it were left to him in that manner; he would scorn to touch so much as a penny if it were left to him on those terms. Barbara Wayne was not to be crucified in this manner. The young man was gentle but he was firm. In the final discussion he announced flatly that if his father persisted in his course and drew up the will as he seemed determined to do, he would kill himself the instant he knew it was signed and witnessed.

"And if I did not do it myself," he almost shouted, "there are three Wayne men who would shoot me on sight like a dog,—and they would be justified in doing it."

"But," pleaded Absalom, "they're bound to find out about her sooner or later."

This was his constant, stubborn argument. The Waynes

were sure to know some day, so what was the sense of being squeamish about it now?

"Just this," replied his son. "If you publicly denounce her as a wanton you also brand me as her seducer, her betrayer. You would make a public boast of it. You would damn me forever. And what you seem to forget is this, father. Forgive me for speaking brutally. You will not be here to share the curses with me, nor the righteous vengeance of the Waynes for that matter. There are people who know that my great-grandfather stole horses from the Waynes and was hanged for it. I stole something far more precious than horses, if you want to put it that way. I wouldn't be hanged for it, to be sure, but, can't you see that you,—you, yourself,—would be lynching me every day of my life, publicly lynching me every day, every hour of my life, even though the Waynes in their contempt allowed me to live to be a hundred? Good God! The whole world would pity Barbara Wayne; it would forgive her, comfort her, take her into its arms and cry over her,—but what of me? What would it do to me? Would it pity me or praise me,—as you are doing,—and would it put me on a pedestal and say that I was a credit even to the Jaggard who was hanged for stealing horses? You know it wouldn't. You know what the world would say. It would say: 'Well, damn him, what else could you expect of a low-down Jaggard?'"

And so it came to pass that when Absalom sent for Judge Playden to draw up the new will, Barbara Wayne was spared for the sake of the Jaggard name!

He was considerably tormented, moreover, by the fear that the two young Waynes would shoot his son down "as they would a dog" if the disclosure was made public in this fashion. Nor was he quite at ease as to what they might do to the despoiler when they did find out. His son managed to reassure him in some measure, however. He partially succeeded in convincing him that Barbara, being a

Wayne, would play the game! They had agreed to go their separate ways. They had parted in friendship, he argued. She would live up to her side of the bargain. She would share the guilt with him. She was that sort. The Waynes were that sort. They were thoroughbreds.

Absalom thought a lot of that word "thoroughbred." Along toward the end he began to believe that his own son, a Jaggard, was a thoroughbred. Queer ways, though, that thoroughbreds have, he could not help thinking. It was beyond his comprehension that a thoroughbred could accept dishonour as Barbara Wayne had and go her way uncomplainingly. He was forced to confess to a secret admiration for the breed that could smile, ask nothing of her own people or of the world itself,—just hold up her head and face the situation with a stout heart and no rancor. For Bennie had told him the story of Barbara: how she had shaken hands with him, stepped proudly across the gutter into which all girls in like case were sure to fall (according to Absalom's estimate) and had set out to earn her own living in the great city of New York. He shook his head many a time in perplexity as he tried to conceive of a Wayne working for some one else as a secretary at so much per week. It seemed like putting a thoroughbred racing mare to the plow and subjecting her to the same sort of currycomb and brush that were roughly applied every morning to "plugs."

"I guess a regular thoroughbred never squeals," he ruminated, over and over again. "It's something they've got in 'em that people like us Jaggards don't have. Rich or poor, they're all alike. They can be quality without having a dollar to their name or a mouthful to eat. I reckon father was right. It ain't the skin and bones that counts. It's the blood."

Not once in the fortnight did young Benjamin Jaggard put foot outside the dooryard of his father's home. Not because

of devotion to the dying man but because he was afraid of encountering two young men who would not even see him if he came face to face with them, who would look past him as if he were a thing invisible. He had no physical fear of Barbara's brothers. He knew they would not fall upon him in rage and rend him. They were not that sort. They would not look at him,—that was all.

This last will and testament was quite brief and to the point. After the usual perfunctory clauses concerning his state of mind, his just debts, his place of burial and a single bequest of twenty thousand dollars to the Presbyterian Church (of which his wife had been a member), he left everything to his beloved son, Benjamin Jaggard: thousands of fertile acres, business blocks in Hurdleford, bank stocks, sheafs of mortgages on county real estate, residence property in the town, government bonds (like his father he had never put a dollar into any other form of security), real estate holdings in the county seat, in Indianapolis and in far-away Texas. A vast, imposing, golden monument to the thrift, the greed and the shrewdness of the scurvy "poor white" sutler who had followed in the wake of and fattened on two great and honorable American armies.

He signed it in the presence of Dr. Higgs and John Dutcher, cashier of the Bank of Hurdleford, of which he was president. If either of those men or Judge Playden, who drew the will, wondered at this change of heart, he asked no questions, nor did Absalom offer a single word by way of explanation. He merely announced as he put down the pen that he guessed there wasn't any reason now why he shouldn't die with a stiff upper lip! Grim, death-bed jest! He died shortly before daybreak the next morning.

The heir to all those far-reaching acres stole out upon the porch as the sun came up in the gay, pink east and gazed through miserable eyes out over his possessions. As far as the eye could reach the land was his,—all save that

snug little sixty-acre tract at the foot of the ridge with its house and its patch of scornful oaks, that tiny feudal domain completely hemmed in by the lands of an enemy lord. Smoke was rising from the chimney among the oaks,—lazy, peaceful smoke that was wafted away from him as if it scorned to blow in his direction.

CHAPTER FOUR

BARBARA AND BENNIE

A MONTH or so before the death of Absalom Jaggard, his son received a long letter from Dr. Higgs. It is necessary to go back that far in order to account for the actions and the motives which led directly and no doubt satisfactorily to the young man's return to favor and ultimately to his restoration as heir to all the Jaggard riches.

The two weeks intervening between the arrival of the doctor's letter at the little flat in Tenth Street, New York City, and the appearance of Bennie in the town of Hurdleford, were of great consequence in so far as the history of the Waynes and the Jaggards is concerned. In view of their bearing on the fortunes and the conduct of certain characters in this narrative, they can be neither ignored nor unceremoniously dismissed as trivial. The courses of at least half a dozen lives were entirely redirected and turned into strange, unexpected channels by the meditations and decisions of that scant half month.

To begin with, Bennie Jaggard and Barbara Wayne were married on the day of their flight from Hurdleford. The ceremony took place at the home of a friend in Chicago, where the couple paused for a short while in their journey toward the glittering east. In passing, it may be stated that they did not go to the trouble of notifying their fathers of this obviously commendable act, assuming that the brief note each had left behind would serve the purpose. Barbara had left a note for her father in which, among other things, she clearly announced that she was going away to be married to Benjamin Jaggard that very day. Bennie had made a similar statement in his note to Absalom. Therefore they

took it for granted that no further information was necessary on the subject. They realized that they had committed the unpardonable sin of marrying each other; that their families had instantly ceased to look upon them as members; that they had cut themselves off for all time from further contact with their people. They realized what they were doing and what would be the outcome of their escapade. So they asked no favors, no concessions; they made not the slightest effort to obtain forgiveness or reinstatement in the homes they had forsaken. The notes they left behind not only covered the ground so far as their present was concerned but also closed the doors against the future.

They were very much in love with each other. This condition had existed for years, though secretly, before they took the step which they fully understood meant banishment. Call it an elopement if you please, but it was more than that in the case of Bennie Jaggard and Barbara Wayne. It was family ostracism. They were not cast off; they had cast themselves off, deliberately and no doubt without a solitary regret. Qualms perhaps, but not regrets.

They knew they could attain their ends in no other way; they knew they could never be married with the consent or even the knowledge of their fathers. It is only just to them to say that they acted as they did because of a condition that made marriage, even courtship, impossible. They were in love, they wanted each other, they did the only thing possible in the circumstances: they severed all of the ties that bound them to the past, conscious of the permanent estrangement that was bound to result. Something told them that their names would never be spoken again in the homes they had abandoned for the sake of love,—not selfish love, they were pleased to argue, but unselfish love in view of all that they were sacrificing. They did not hesitate once they had resolved to take the fateful step.

Barbara unquestionably believed that she had made the

greater sacrifice of the two. The spirits of hundreds of dead and gone Waynes still living within her would have revolted had she not been the first to rebel. She throttled them happily while they were still contemplating the step she was purposing to take, but the memory of them survived. Devotedly, unreservedly as she loved Bennie Jaggard she could not help feeling that she was his blood superior. The spirits of the dead and gone Waynes had seen to that long before she was born.

Bennie, on the other hand, sacrificed something decidedly more worshipful than blood in these days, something very coarse and materialistic and prideless: money. Without so much as a sigh, he had given up a fortune in order to obtain what he was pleased to call happiness.

As this chronicle progresses it will be seen that neither Barbara Wayne's pride nor Benjamin's Jaggard's scorn was strong enough to resist the tempter, greed. And the reader may decide for himself which of the two stooped the lower, Barbara Wayne or Benjamin Jaggard.

A marked copy of a newspaper sent to Dr. Higgs the spring before had provided him with what may be termed a clew to the whereabouts of young Jaggard. The paper contained in the art news section the brief account of an exhibit of water colors being made by a rising and as yet unknown artist in the galleries of one of the lesser dealers in the City of New York. The doctor knew that Bennie had sent the copy to him, no doubt trusting that he in turn would give the "item" to the *Hurdleford Express*. The critic, in the guarded manner peculiar to critics, had mildly praised the young artist's work and had ventured the opinion that he showed "great promise." Months afterward, the doctor chanced sending his letter announcing Absalom Jaggard's fatal illness to Bennie in care of the dealer. In due time it was forwarded to the studio apartment in Tenth Street.

Now Bennie and Barbara were not living in luxury at

that time. True they had a cozy and at all times immaculate dwelling-place,—for both of them had been brought up in the country and believed in that sort of cleanliness which is known as order,—but their funds were practically exhausted and Bennie's water colors were not selling. He was earning a fairly adequate sum each week, however, drawing pictures for an advertising concern,—barely enough, however, to provide them with the actual necessities. Nothing at all was left over for pleasure or profit. Barbara, with what Bennie was wont to classify as the "degrading pluck of a thoroughbred," had taken a position as clerk in a book store not far removed from Washington Square, where she earned twelve dollars a week.

They were not discontented, nor were they discouraged. They were young and strong and they were optimistic. They believed in themselves. Some day Bennie's paintings would bring good prices and he would be well on the road to fame. Some day they would snap their fingers and laugh at the troubles they had put behind them. But there were times when the pinch was a little harder than usual and then they thought, without bitterness, of the Jaggard money that they had "squandered" by getting married to each other. At least that is the way Bennie put it in quaintly referring to the penalty they were paying for being Mr. and Mrs. Benjamin Jaggard, traitors.

Even when the time came for Barbara to give up her position in the bookstore because she was expecting a baby inside of three months, they were not dismayed. Bennie, foreseeing this not unwelcome complication in their affairs, had put aside one thousand dollars of the money his mother had left him in her will. Against this amount they steadfastly refused to draw, even when funds for the ordinary necessities of life were at the lowest ebb. They smiled at consequences. Poorer people than they had had babies, lots of them, and had managed. There were periods, to be sure, when Barbara fretted under the torments of those hot sum-

mer days and nights; times when she became peevish and complaining and to a certain extent rebellious. But she never failed to beseech Bennie's forgiveness after these fits of irritability.

Then at the end of the stifling, almost unbearable August, the letter from Dr. Higgs reached them. The good doctor earnestly implored Bennie to return to Hurdleford and try to set matters straight with his father before it was too late. Mr. Jaggard's time was short, a week or two at best. It was a well-known fact that he had disinherited his son; his will was public property. Dr. Higgs endeavored to be diplomatic. (He had had a great deal of trouble in composing the long letter, which had been drastically and tactfully edited by his wife, and he hoped in the opening paragraph that Bennie would not consider him meddlesome or officious in offering advice.) He thought it was only right that nothing should be left undone that might possibly result in overcoming Mr. Jaggard's unalterable decision to disinherit his son.

"I will be frank with you," he wrote. "Your father is set in his opinions. He is very bitter toward you. I am afraid that he will not change. I regret to state that he is like a stone wall when it comes to Barbara. In my last talk with him he declared he would never recognize her as his daughter-in-law and he would not forgive you for marrying her. Nevertheless I have hopes that if he sees you and you make an appeal to him he may weaken in his stand. Anyhow it is worth trying. It would be all wrong for you to be deprived of the fortune he is sure to leave behind him when he dies. The way it stands now he is leaving vast sums of money and so forth to the church, a hospital and other beneficiaries which I do not exactly recall. Understand, I am not promising that any good will come of your visit so far as the will is concerned, but I believe it to be your duty as a son to come and see him before he dies. It is only right and honorable. If you decide to

come back to Hurdleford please wire me and I will then confess to him that I have written you, but not before. I will use all my influence to make him see that he ought to receive you and forgive you. He may be selfish but that is no reason why you should be. I am sure that Barbara's father will receive her and no doubt forgive her in case she decides to come back with you. I hope she does. I have not talked with him but I believe he is less set in his ways than your father."

There was more of the letter than the portion here given and along the same line. Bennie and Barbara reread it many times. They did not resent the good offices of the old family doctor. His letter, which at first was perused with youthful disdain, came before long to be the subject of serious discussion. They suddenly awoke to the fact that, after all, the old man back home was Bennie's father and that he was dying. They had hurt him desperately. They had caused him to suffer.

And, when all was said and done, was he to blame for the situation or were they? Was he any more arbitrary than they? Were they not as stubborn and as arrogant in their happiness as he was in his anger and grief? Why should they hold out against their fathers when they themselves had done the casting off? How could they expect their fathers to forgive them when they steadfastly, even superciliously, refused to utter so much as the simplest plea? They had wronged their fathers; had those two old men ever wronged them? Whose place was it, then, to make the first advance, whose to ask forgiveness? Surely not these two injured fathers. And, after all, who was suffering and unhappy? Who had been struck from behind? Struck down by those whom they loved and trusted. These were but a few of the questions they asked themselves. The receipt of Dr. Higgs's letter caused these two young people to take stock of themselves.

Barbara became moody, disconsolate; she indulged in

long fits of brooding. Her smooth brow wore a constant frown as of perplexity; her dark, beautiful eyes were clouded. For two or three days, Bennie went about his work and about the little flat with gloomy face and at times averted eyes. He was listless, preoccupied. She caught him more than once staring out of the window into the cluttered back yards below, his hands in his pockets, his shoulders hunched. She was sorry for him; intensely sorry. She knew what was going on in his mind. For the first time since their marriage he was faltering. They had gayly sworn not to ask to be taken back, forgiven or even recognized by their fathers. Up to now there had been no definite reason for regretting this agreement. But now there was a reason, a very definite reason. She could see that he was faltering. He was trying to make up his mind to ask her to release him from the hasty, perhaps gallant promise volunteered a year and a half ago and to which she herself had subscribed.

Barbara was a beautiful girl even in the circumstances. Conditions, to be sure, gave her a certain haggard, beaten look, but even these trying days could not besmirch the natural beauty of her face. Her features were clean cut and regular, almost faultless,—so faultless in fact that one might have described her face as being a trifle hard when in repose. Her eyes, dark and expressive, were either warm and appealing or just the opposite—cold and stormy according to her mood or her desire. No matter which, they were lovely. They could melt into tears when touched by the slightest emotion or freeze to glittering ice when, on rare occasions, she gave way to temper. Her mouth was wide and sensitive; there were times, however, when her red lips became scornful, insolent, domineering, though these occasions were few and far between, and never were they anything but tender for Bennie. For him they were always eager, hungry, inviting. She was a tall, graceful girl, with a figure that under ordinary conditions was perfect. A

famous painter with whom they became acquainted soon after their arrival in New York had said to her once, looking her over critically:

"You are the most beautiful woman I have ever seen. I would give my soul to paint you in the nude."

To which she, as yet unaccustomed to the ingenuous ways and manners of artists, great and small, had replied. a dark flush spreading over her startled face:

"Where my people come from men are shot for saying things like that."

He wrinkled his brow, momentarily puzzled. Then he smiled and bowed, his hand on his heart.

"And what do you do to them when they say they would *not* like to paint you in the nude?"

Whereupon she frowned and then her face broke into a smile. "You must forgive me. I suppose you meant it as a compliment. I am very ignorant, you see."

"It is my place to apologize, not yours, my dear young lady. I perceive that I have presumed on too slight an acquaintance."

By this time she had recovered herself. "On the contrary, you appear to be very well acquainted with me," she said, her eyes hardening. "You would hardly be likely to risk your soul on an uncertainty."

With that she turned her back upon the great painter and walked away.

After several days, Bennie announced his decision to write to his father.

"It's only right and decent, Barbara," he said hastily, catching in her eyes an expression he had never seen in them before,—a curious mingling of doubt and defiance, fear and determination. "He is my father and I ought to—well, I ought to write to him, now that he is dying. If it was your father, I would say go ahead and——"

"I've been thinking it all over, Bennie," she broke in,

rather breathlessly, as if eager to speak what was in her mind and yet dreading the outcome. She was sitting in a rocker at the open window, getting what freshness she could out of the hot September night wind. "We are fools, both of us. We say we don't care for money, but we are lying to ourselves and lying to each other just because we are in love. Now, listen, dear. You have got to make peace with your father,—you've just got to. It's all right for you to be high-and-mighty about it, and all that, but you would be a fool to let all that money go to some one else if you could help it. I am talking sense now, so you——"

"Good Lord, Barbara, don't you know what I'd have to do in order to get that money?" he demanded, staring at her. "Don't you know I'd have to give you up? I'd have to leave you. I'd have to choose between you and him. That's positive. I know him. He'd never give in. And do you think I'd give you up for all the money in the world? Don't you know——"

"Sit down, Bennie," she said. "Don't walk up and down like that, and don't look as if I had slapped you or something. Bring that chair over here beside me. It's cooler here. I want to talk to you. I want to talk to you about something that came into my mind to-day. See what you think of it. We've got to do something awfully quick, dear, and—and rotten."

"Rotten? What do you mean?" he stammered, sitting down beside her and blinking stupidly.

"In the first place," she began, taking a long breath and leaning back in the chair. Then she suddenly reached out and clasped his hand tightly. "Oh, Bennie, if I didn't love you so much I wouldn't care. You know I love you, don't you,—better than anything else in the world?"

"Of course I know it, darling," he said softly, as he put his arm about her and drew her close. His lips found hers

in a quick, almost uneasy kiss. "But, I say, what's got into you? What are you driving at?"

"Maybe you will despise me when I've told you," she whispered.

"Nonsense! I may laugh at you but,—no, I shan't even do that. Fire away."

She was silent for a moment, looking out of the window. There were no lights in the room.

"I just can't help thinking about all that money going to churches and hospitals and things like that," she said at last. "It belongs to you. It should come to you. Wait! Don't interrupt, please. You know as well as anything, dear, that I do not want it for myself. But I can't bear to think of you being robbed of it,—yes, robbed is the word, —simply because I stand in the way."

"Holy smoke! I won't listen to any such talk as that!"

"Well, it's the truth, just the same. If it were not for me, you'd step into nearly a million when your father dies, Bennie."

"Good heaven! You don't suppose I'm regretting what I've done, do you?" he cried in honest amazement.

"No, I don't suppose anything of the sort. But I've been thinking of a way to—to get around it, Bennie."

She spoke quickly, eagerly. Her fingers tightened on his.

"Get around what? Oh, I say, you don't mean a way to get around father, do you? Wheedle him,—coax him or anything like that? Because if that's your idea, you might as well let go of it, dearest. He'll never give in. He can't. It isn't in him."

"But he would if I was out of the way, wouldn't he?" she demanded, leaning forward and taking a fresh grip on his hand.

"Out of the way?" he almost gasped, bewildered. "For the Lord's sake, Barbara,—what ails you? You don't mean, —say, just what *do* you mean by out of the way? Leave me? Blow your dear, foolish, little brain out or jump into

the river or,— Gosh! But you've got bats in the belfry to-night, old girl. Come along now and hop into bed. I'll give you a bromide and——"

"Of course I don't mean anything like that. I love life too well for that and I love you better than I love life. Do you suppose I'm going to commit suicide and lose you forever?" She laughed aloud. "Make you rich for some other woman to snatch up and marry? Not much! I'm not such a goose as all that."

"Well, then, what is the idea? You can't get a divorce from me, you know. Not on such short notice, anyhow. That takes time,—and evidence."

"Now let's look at it reasonably, sensibly. We both know your father has disinherited you because you married me. That's plain, isn't it?"

"Because I married a Wayne," substituted Bennie. "Just as your father felt about it when you married a Jaggard. But there's no use going into that again, dear. We've talked it——"

"We're going to have some one else to consider beside ourselves before long, Bennie. I've been doing a lot of thinking about the baby that's coming. You and I could get along and be happy without a nickel of your father's money. But how about the baby?"

"Oh, I guess I can take care of a baby or two," said he, loftily. "I'm not a pauper, you know. I can work and——"

"That isn't the point. Have you the right to deprive this little Jaggard baby,—your child and your father's grand-child,—and, heaven knows, there may be other children besides this one,—have you the right to practically disinherit your own child before it is born?"

"See here, Barbara, old girl, you're getting a bit daffy, sure as shooting. This thing has got on your nerves. I'm not disinheriting my child. That's nonsense."

"It isn't nonsense. It's a fact."

He made a wry face. "I don't see how we're going to

stop the baby's coming, just because its hard-hearted, though merely prospective, father figures on disinheriting it. We ought to have thought about that sooner."

"Don't be silly. Now let's go back to existing conditions. As I said before, your father won't have anything to do with you because he thinks you are married to me."

"That's the way it stands at—say, did you say because he *thinks* I am married to you?" he burst out, half starting up from his chair.

"I did. Thinks. That is just what I said."

"I don't get you."

"Sit down. If your father could be convinced that you never did marry me,—never did marry one of us detestable Waynes,—why, don't you see, Bennie, he'd take you back, fall on your neck, and—bang! He'd make a new will and leave everything to you."

"Good God!" gasped Bennie, gaping. Then he leaped to his feet, almost shouting in his anger. "Say! What do you take me for? A dirty dog? That's the damndest thing I ever——"

"Don't get excited," she broke in, coolly. "Of course, I don't mean to have you proclaim to the whole world,—not even to Hurdleford or Dr. Higgs or anybody else if it can be avoided,—that I am not your wife. I don't like the idea of being put down as your mistress. There's even a worse name than that, but decent women don't utter it. Now let me speak. I'll tell you my scheme. See what you think of it."

Presently he cooled down and sat perfectly still while she unfolded the plan that had come into her head,—her incredible scheme to defeat old Absalom on his deathbed. Subsequent events proved that she overcame Bennie's very natural objections. They proved her to be the stronger of the two, and by far the more unprincipled.

"But, confound it, Barbara," he protested, after she had beaten down his last defense; "can't you see that I

would have to degrade you,—yes, put shame upon you,—in my father's eyes? And, God knows, I don't want to do that. I love you. I am proud of you. I want him to know I am proud of you. I——”

She interrupted him, her eyes hard and glittering, her smile scornful. She shrugged her shoulders as she spoke.

“He would die happy, Bennie,” she said. “That's something, isn't it?”

“Oh, Lord!” groaned he, burying his face in his hands.

“There is more at stake than your pride or mine,” she said, slowly. “You must not overlook the fact that you can have both me and the fortune. You have me already and you are entitled to the other. It belongs to you. Your father has no right to take it away from you. His father accumulated it. He made his fortune so that he could leave it to a Jaggard when he died, so that it could go on to other Jaggards in succession. Your father has no right to deprive you or your children or your grandchildren of all that old Mr. Benjamin left behind for him to pass on to the next Jaggard and so on down the line. Your father is not leaving property that he acquired or money that he earned. He is leaving your grandfather's money, your grandfather's lands, all the things he worked and slaved for. Don't misunderstand me, Bennie. After all is said and done, I am a Wayne. I don't relish the idea of taking Jaggard money. Forgive me if I hurt you. I don't mean to. I am only telling you the truth. I am proud to be your wife, Bennie, but I am also proud to be a Wayne. I would rather starve than take a penny of old Benjamin Jaggard's money if I alone was to be considered. But I am not alone. I have a baby coming. I have you, and you are entitled to every Jaggard dollar there is. I stand in the way. That's plain. There is only one way to get justice, and that's the way I've suggested.”

“Justice!” he sneered. “I'd like to know what justice there is in making my wife out to be a prostitute.”

"You know she isn't one and I know it," she replied. "The only person in all this world who will believe that I am a bad woman is your father, and he will be silent."

"He may not be as silent as we think," argued Bennie. "What are we to do if he insists on making everything public?"

"You can always stop that," she said, "by confessing to him that you have lied."

"And if it got to the ears of your brothers, they'd fix me," went on Bennie, compressing his lips.

"You will have to see to it that they don't know anything about it."

"George and Tom loved you, Barbara," he mused, rather dejectedly. "You were everything to them. You can't tell me they don't love you any longer, no matter what you've done. If they thought I'd wronged you, they'd—why, they'd kill me on sight."

She paled. Her fingers gripped his fiercely. "That must never happen,—never! I couldn't stand that, Bennie. You—you must be careful. You must keep it from them."

"We'd be taking an awful chance, dear."

"Make your father swear never to tell, make him promise," she cried, feverishly.

"I'll tell him the truth before I'll let him tell anybody," he said, reassuringly. "Don't you worry about me. I don't want to be shot."

"I love George and Tom,—but, God! How I should hate them if they touched you, if they did anything to you."

Then, after several days of indecision, Bennie wrote to Dr. Higgs. He avoided any mention of Barbara. It was a letter that could be shown to Absalom. He informed the doctor that he was leaving for Hurdleford on the 12th in compliance with his request and asked him to prepare his father against his coming. In conclusion, he wrote:

"I must ask you not to mention my coming to any one else. My visit is to my father and not to Hurdleford. The

townspeople do not like me. There are many, in fact nearly all, who will say that I have come for the purpose of persuading my father to change his will. This is not true. I do not want his money. But I do want him to forgive me before he dies and I want him to know that I love him. Nevertheless, as you know, there are people who will attribute other motives to me. Therefore I beg you not to let the news get out in advance that I am coming. If I am permitted to do so, I shall remain with my father till the end. After that, I shall leave as I came, with as little notice as possible. Of course every one in town will know that I am there. That cannot be helped. As you well know, the train arrives in broad daylight. But if I come unheralded no one will be looking for me at the station. People are curious, doctor. Do not meet me. I shall drive straight to your house the instant the train gets in. I shall be grateful to you then for future advice and guidance."

In pursuance with a design carefully worked out and agreed upon, Barbara was to leave the apartment the day before his departure for the West. Hasty arrangements had been made for her to go to a small New England village up in the hills not far from the hospitals of Hartford or Winsted. A single room in a boarding-house had been taken for a month. The flat was to be closed during his absence and hers; no directions were left with the superintendent as to the forwarding of mail. It was understood that neither was to write to the other except in case of some grave emergency.

They had thought it all out. There was always the chance of its leaking out through the Hurdleford postoffice that he was writing to her or she to him; ill-luck would see to it that some one carried the news to the house on the hill. Telegrams, letters, any sort of communication would betray them. His letters could be traced to her in the little Connecticut village; the postmarks on hers would tell the tale. All would be ruined, everything go to naught, if his father

were to discover by any hook or crook,—and such things always happened—that Bennie had lied to him when he declared that Barbara was not his wife. So there were to be no letters; they were determined to avoid all possible traps. Nevertheless,—if she needed him desperately she was to write. Caution was to be abandoned in that case, no matter what the cost. He would drop everything and come to her if she needed him; he would snap his fingers at the fortune. It could go to the devil, he said over and over again. *She* came first.

But Barbara figuratively set her jaw and steeled her eyes when he made these fierce declarations. To herself she said that she would not weaken; she would not let anything happen. No matter what befell her, she would not send for him. Even if she believed herself to be dying, she would not send for him; she would not spoil his chance. There was too much at stake. Her mind was made up; she already had proved that she could not be shaken when her mind was once made up to go through with a thing. Had she not run away with the grandson of Benjamin Jaggard, “poor white” and son of a horsethief?

Realizing that a considerable length of time might pass before anything definite happened, Bennie insisted on providing her with the means to face the delay. The doctors were usually mistaken. When they said a man had only two weeks to live they were almost invariably mistaken. Sometimes the patient hung on for a month, often it was two months. To guard against any such contingency, he drew out of bank and deposited to her credit all but one hundred dollars of the money he had kept there to meet impending expenses. He made her as safe as possible.

If his father refused to receive him, he was coming back to her at once. On the other hand,—well, who could tell what the next few weeks had in store for them?

“But,” he said doggedly, “I’ll come back before the baby is born, no matter what happens, Barbara. That’s settled.

Nothing can make me change my mind about that, dearest."

And with that and no other object in mind, he set out for Hurdleford, bent on carrying out the unsavory plan his wife had suggested.

CHAPTER FIVE

BENNIE COMES INTO HIS OWN

SOUND maxims, such as "The best laid plans of mice and men," "There's many a slip 'twixt cup and lip," were never more fittingly exemplified than in the stratagems of Bennie and Barbara Jaggard. They had devised craftily, carefully, and, so far as their own efforts were concerned, successfully. The former, coming upon his father when that once inexorable old man was least able to resist, accomplished the unbelievable. He found him weakened in flesh and in spirit: helpless, miserable, and to a certain degree gullible.

Bennie had had his way in the unequal conflict; he had gained his object, which was to exact in return for his own detestable avowal a promise (which was faithfully kept) not to expose the shame of Barbara Wayne. So far as either he or his father knew, the story of her downfall had not gone beyond the four walls of the sick-room. But once more an old aphorism, born of stealth and put into words by guilty lips that whispered, proved its virtue: all unbeknownst to them, the "walls had ears."

Strictly speaking, it was not the walls that heard the story of Barbara; something far less upright but infinitely more reliable was responsible for the leak. An unguarded key-hole! A sour-faced, constantly scolded nurse, assuming an ardent, inquisitive stoop,—an unprayerful bending of the knees, so to speak,—had applied a commonplace, everyday human ear to the orifice, and grave were the consequences thereof.

This nurse, a spinster born and bred in Hurdleford, despised her patient. Not once, but a thousand times, he had

upbraided her in terms she could not possibly have endured, being a prominent and respected member of the church his wife had attended, and at the same time professing to be a Christian lady of long standing herself, had she been receiving a cent less than thirty dollars a week for taking care of him, which was somewhat in excess of the pay ordinarily demanded for twenty-four hour duty in the town of Hurdleford. She had been with him for nearly six months; it was a good, steady job; in fact it was so good that she rather hated to see him die, notwithstanding a frequently recurring impulse to strangle him with her own hands. Her name was Joslin, Eva Joslin; she had reached the age when everybody in Hurdleford said it always would be Joslin,—unless, of course, the world came to its proverbial end. John Primmer, the town optimist,—druggist by profession,—argued that there still was hope for Eva. Look at the wireless telegraph, he contended. Wasn't that alone enough to prove that we still lived in an age of miracles? Who would have believed that we would have to have telephones, electric lights, phonographs, automobiles, moving pictures, flying machines, submarines, appendixes, and so forth, before the Lord decided that it was time to let somebody ask Eva to marry him? Hadn't Jonah spent considerable time in the bowels of the whale and lived to tell all the lies he wanted to about it? Hadn't Lot's wife turned into a pillar of salt? Hadn't George Washington crossed the Delaware standing up in the front end of a row-boat without even attempting to balance himself while the craft was being bumped every which way by good-sized icebergs? Hadn't Grover Cleveland licked James G. Blaine for the presidency in 1884? Why, nothing was impossible. And as Mr. Primmer personally and more or less publicly offered these and other mordant crumbs of consolation to Miss Joslin, who happened to be his sister-in-law, it is needless to say that she abhorred him.

She was well on to sixty and she had been a nurse for

something over thirty years. It wasn't age altogether that made her crabbed, nor was the blessed state of virginity entirely responsible for her curiosity. It was because she seldom if ever saw anything but the worst side of humanity. There wasn't an ailment known to the human frame that she had not experienced vicariously, so she hated all humanity because of the afflictions it had heaped upon her. And yet all Hurdleford proclaimed her to be the best, the gentlest, the most sympathetic of nurses. She put up with everything. She was the one person in Hurdleford to whom you could tell your troubles; the one person to whom you could safely complain about your husband or your wife or the doctor himself; the one with whom you could feel more or less secure in discussing the habits, frailties and iniquities of your fellow citizens; the one who made it her business to be patient without actually being a patient. In short, you could be just as unkind as you liked, not only to her but to other people, and she met you more than half way by not suffering in silence.

For more than thirty years she had nursed the grievances as well as the ailments of Hurdleford; she was soaked through and through with the wormwood and gall of human affliction and human bitterness. She had never known anything but complaints in both senses of the word. So, at sixty, she was sour on all humanity,—and perhaps justly so. Humanity had given her nothing to think about except ill-health, ill-nature and despair; teaspoons, bedpans, purgatives, powders, bottles, bandages and disinfectants; interfering mothers and wives, idiotic fathers and husbands; and sometimes death.

Death? There was no mystery about Death to her. She'd seen hundreds of people die. They all became cold and stiff in exactly the same way; people wept; she made a note of just how many days they owed her for, packed her bag and went off to nurse somebody else who was still alive! That was Eva Joslin's grind. People thought she was

wonderful. She knew better. She could and did say to herself that she had an advantage over the undertaker. He handled 'em only when they were dead.

She did not like the Jaggards nor did she like the Waynes. She had nursed old Benjamin and she had nursed old Mrs. Wayne. They died on her. They couldn't help that but she hated them for it just the same. And so she was filled with a secret delight when young Bennie ran off with Barbara. Somehow that seemed to console her. It meant disaster. It would have pleased her more if Bennie had not come home to be with his father during his last days, but since he had done the dutiful and obvious thing, there was only one thing left for her to do and that was to despise him with greater intensity because of his weakness and cupidity. She was in no doubt whatsoever as to Bennie's motive in coming home. He was after the money. Still she could have overlooked all this, she could have been more or less contented to let matters take their course had it not been for the fact that she was compelled to suffer the humiliation of being ordered to stay out of her own sick-room! A dozen times a day she was told to get out so that father and son could be alone together. So one day, smarting under the indignity and goaded by a natural curiosity, she put her ear to the keyhole. She had done it a hundred times before but only for the legitimate purpose of ascertaining whether her crotchety patient was asleep and snoring. But this time she heard something that stunned her. Thereafter she listened whenever the opportunity afforded. She shared the secret with father and son. She knew that Barbara Wayne had gone to the bad.

It was not until after old Absalom died and she had packed her bag to go out in quest of another job that she began to utter such things as: "If you knew what I know you'd be paralyzed," or "I could tell you something that would make your hair stand on end," and so on, until finally, soon after the funeral, she gave way under the strain and

blurted out the whole story. To be sure she tried her best to keep it in the family by telling no one save her sister, Mrs. Primmer. Mrs. Primmer told her husband, who fiercely declared that Eva ought to be tarred and feathered for starting such a report; he even went so far as to assure a neighbor, Mr. Hallock, that it was an outrageous lie and shouldn't be repeated. Before nightfall most of Hurdleford was whispering and shocked people were saying: "I knew there was some reason why he didn't bring her back with him." Later they said, "This explains why Absalom changed his will and left everything to Bennie, the damned skunk." And at last, with grave faces and hushed voices: "What will George and Tom do to him if this gets to their ears?"

Meanwhile Bennie Jaggard, ignorant of what was going on in the town, kept close to the house on the hill. He had won out for himself and Barbara and the coming babe, but he was not proud of the victory. He had tricked his father, —tricked him on his deathbed. Somehow, he was ashamed to go out and face people.

He was not afraid of the Wayne boys. The worst they could do would be to ignore him, and he could stand that. He did not expect them to speak to him or to recognize him. By the same token, he was under no obligation to speak to or to notice them. If they made the first move, he would be glad to shake hands with them and call them brothers, but he would not make the advances. He had always liked them, even though he felt that they had never liked him. He did not hold that against them. Down in his soul he nursed the hope that they might all become friends again, now that his unhappy father was gone. He had not lied to the Waynes. He had lied only to his father, and his father was dead.

Bennie had not seen his father's latest will, but he knew the contents. He knew it was brief and that practically everything had been bequeathed to "my beloved son Ben-

jamin." He was in no doubt about this. His father had told him what he intended to do. Dr. Higgs, who had witnessed the instrument, confided to him that he was the sole heir and had added to his comfort by expressing the belief that everything would be smoothed out between him and the Waynes, now that Absalom, without mentioning Barbara in the will, had accepted her as his son's wife and in so doing had indirectly made her a beneficiary. So that was all right, thought Bennie. He knew, however, why Barbara was not mentioned in the document.

Judge Playden had the will in his safe. The old lawyer explained to the son that it would be opened and read to him and filed for probate after a lapse of several days, "simply because I am old fashioned and can't help feeling that we owe it to the dead to observe a brief period of grief."

"Of course," he had gone on to say, "if you insist on having it read immediately, Bennie, we will do it as soon as we get back from the graveyard."

The young man had shaken his head and said he was not interested. Any time would do. It did not matter to him.

Nevertheless he chafed under the delay. He had decided not to communicate with Barbara until every vestige of doubt was dispelled. He wanted to be absolutely certain before writing to her. She was never out of his thoughts; he could picture her off there in Connecticut, waiting, wondering, suffering from loneliness, consumed by uncertainty as to the outcome of their scheme. She had had no word from him in nearly three weeks; she was ignorant not only of the progress he was making but of the anticipated death of his father. How long the days and weeks must have been for her,—how lonely the nights. While he was consumed by profound loneliness and sighed a great deal, he took some comfort in the thought that she must know that matters were going well with him or he would have given up the task as hopeless and rejoined her long ago.

The will was to be read on Thursday afternoon, two days after the funeral. It seemed like two years to Bennie. Two years before he could telegraph to her that his father was dead and he was starting east at once to bring her back to Hurdleford as mistress of the house on the hill.

Thursday came and he walked down into the town for the first time since his arrival. He no longer dreaded meeting either of the Wayne boys. As a matter of fact, he was rather eager and excited over the prospect of encountering them in the street. He was conscious of a queer, indescribable sensation,—he could not tell whether it was of relief, defiance or anxiety. Perhaps it was this new freedom. People looked at him curiously. Some of them bowed distantly as to a person who has just suffered bereavement, others stared with what could not be mistaken for anything but disapproval or even animosity. Well, in any case, he was saying to himself as he strode along, it didn't matter what people thought about him. As soon as he could find the right man to conduct the farm and to look after his other interests, he would return to New York with Barbara and their baby and he would come back to Hurdleford only when it was absolutely necessary.

He had been thinking a good deal about the baby, now that affairs were on the point of turning out well for all of them. Perhaps it was sentimental foolishness on his part, but he had become possessed, even obsessed, with the desire to have his heir born in the old family home at the top of the hill. And this reminded him of another claim he would have upon the Wayne boys. They would be uncles,—uncles to his baby and hers. That ought to make a lot of difference. Besides, wasn't he now going to make his wife, their sister, the richest woman in the county, and wasn't he going to give her all the luxuries that wealth could buy? Travel, fine clothes, jewelry,—everything.

A faint smile lurked in his eyes as he made his way up the street. All things considered, he, Bennie Jaggard, had

done everybody a good turn, including the contemptuous Waynes. The soft light of benignancy shone in his smile.

As he approached the stairway leading up to the offices of Playden & Crouse, Tom Wayne, Barbara's younger brother, emerged from Primmer's Drugstore at the corner above. He was accompanied by Stella Davidson, the daughter of the Presbyterian minister. Hurdleford took it for granted that she and Tom Wayne were engaged. The girl was the first to see Bennie Jaggard. She laid her hand on Tom's arm as she stopped stock-still.

"There is Bennie Jaggard, Tom," she said quickly, a trace of anxiety in her voice. Her brown eyes were slightly distended, her fingers tense in their clutch on his big forearm. "He's coming this way."

Young Wayne's body stiffened. For a second or two his gaze rested on the approaching figure, then was averted. He stared at the second story windows across the street, his lips curling in a faint, disdainful smile.

"He turned in at Judge Playden's stairway," said the girl a moment later, relief in her voice. "He bowed to me, Tom."

"Well, why shouldn't he?" inquired her companion, looking down into her eyes. "You nodded to him first, didn't you?"

"No, I didn't. That is, not till after he smiled and lifted his hat."

"There is no reason why you shouldn't nod to him, Stella, —no reason why you shouldn't talk to him. I'm honest about it, dear. You're not mixed up in the Wayne and Jaggard row yet."

"I'd give anything if it could be straightened out, Tom," she said wistfully. She was a very pretty girl, slender, slightly under medium height, with dark, intelligent eyes; her hair was chestnut-coloured, her cheeks smooth and warm, her chin firm and purposeful. "I adored Barbara. I wish we could be friends always."

As they walked slowly past the stairway, she shot a quick glance over her shoulder. Tom Wayne kept his eyes straight ahead. His face was like a mask.

"I guess you know how much I cared for Barbara," he said, after they were well beyond the narrow entrance to the stairs.

She looked up at his face, quickly, furtively. Her eyes were troubled. She had heard the ugly tale told by Eva Joslin. She wondered if it had come to the ears of her sweetheart. For two or three days people had been talking about Barbara Wayne's disgrace but always they had changed the subject or carefully avoided it when any of the Waynes drew near enough to hear. All day long, all the night before and the day preceding that Stella had been sick with anxiety, dread and, at the same time, the queer self-abashment that is felt by a good girl when she discovers that a cherished and admired girl friend has turned out bad.

She was again asking herself the questions that had filled her thoughts ever since the story came out. Had Tom heard Eva Joslin's tale? Had it reached the ears of the Waynes in the last few days or had they known all along about Barbara's transgression? Had Barbara written home long months ago to tell them of her plight? Were they sending money to the unfortunate girl who could never show her face in Hurdleford again? Or had they ignored her appeal? And if the Wayne boys knew, what would they do to the man who had ruined and abandoned their sister? This last question she had asked herself over and over again in a sort of frenzied despair,—for all Hurdleford was asking it in awed, significant undertones. What would the Wayne boys do to Bennie Jaggard?

"Yes, I know," she said, a little breathlessly. "You and George loved her better than anything else on earth."

"Well, she's our sister," said he, rather gruffly, almost

apologetically. "Let's not talk about her, Stella. We don't even talk about her at home."

"Forgive me, Tom. This is the first time I've ever spoken to you about Barbara, isn't it? I knew how you felt."

"She'll probably come back here now," said he, after a brief silence. His steady gray eyes were slightly contracted. "I suppose Bennie squared himself with the old man. That means he'll come in for all the property and they'll be living up there on the hill before long."

She started. Then, he did not know! He had not heard! For a moment her heart seemed to stop beating. She swayed. A faintness assailed her. She thought she was going to fall.

"Oh, Tom!" she murmured, involuntarily.

He looked at her. "What's the matter, Stella? Don't you feel well? You look as if——"

"I'm all right," she interrupted, pulling herself together. Then quickly: "I thought that automobile was going to hit those little boys."

"Lord, they're reckless," he said, frowning.

"They ought to be arrested."

"I mean the children," said he.

"I'm going in here, Tom," she said abruptly, pausing in front of Holmes's Drygoods Store. "Thanks so much for the ice cream soda. It was just what I needed."

"I thought you were going down to the Library."

"I am, later," she said lamely, nervously. "I just remembered that I have to stop here to get something for mother."

"What's the matter, Stella?" he demanded, sharply. "What's upset you?"

"Why, how ridiculous! Can't I stop in at Holmes's for some worsted without being upset about it?" She forced a laugh.

"If it doesn't take you too long, I'll wait out here in

front for you. Then I'll go to the Library with you afterwards, if you don't mind."

"Oh, that will be great, Tom," she cried, affecting eagerness. "But are you sure you can spare the time? Somebody might want to buy an automobile in a hurry."

He grinned sheepishly. He was very good-looking, this rangy, boyish chap with the smile that had won him an army of friends. Fair-haired, clean-featured and clean-limbed, his skin was so deeply bronzed that the contrast with his hair was not only noticeable but effective. His brother George, on the other hand, was dark of eye and hair and more serious of mien; he too was tall but far more powerfully built than the younger Wayne. George had the firm, erect carriage of a soldier; Tom walked with the loose-jointed, careless swing of a happy-go-lucky recruit. He was lean, broad of shoulder, with huge, bony hands and, to his own everlasting mortification, extremely large feet. Their father was a tall man.

"No chance of that," he said in response to Stella's jibe. "We sold it yesterday," he added quaintly. "I've got an hour or so to spare, Stell. Don't have to be back till five. They chased little brother out this afternoon. Father drove in and said he had to have a talk with George alone. Just as I was leaving, your father and John Primmer and Dr. Higgs showed up."

"My father?" faltered Stella.

"Looks as if they're planning to open the meeting with prayer," drawled Tom. "Sort of a general religious conference. Your father's a Presbyterian, Primmer's a Baptist and Doc Higgs is a Methodist. They went upstairs and closed the door to the stockroom. I took the hint and beat it. I guess I must have been doing something that's got all the churches down on me. The only church I know of that could possibly have anything against me is the Presbyterian, and that's because there's some talk of me marrying one of its most prominent members."

But Stella was not amused by his drollery. She turned cold. If he had been observing her closely he would have caught the sharp gleam of alarm in her eyes, he would have noted the pallor that spread swiftly over her face. For a moment she was speechless. She could only stare unseeingly down the street. The significance of that secret conference was clear to her. Eva Joslin's disclosures had reached the ears of at least one of the Waynes. Her brain worked like lightning. She understood. They were keeping it from Tom, for the present at least. They knew him. He was hot-headed, reckless. He would do something desperate. George was older, less emotional, not so liable to lose his head under— But Tom was speaking to her.

"I'll be waiting out here for you, Stella," he was saying. "Don't be long. We'll stop at the Library and then I'll take you out for a little run in the country."

She came to a sudden decision.

"Let's go now, Tom. I can stop in here when we get back,—and the Library doesn't matter. I'd love to take a nice long ride with you, dear."

Later, as they sped down the shady river road in Tom's car, he put an end to a long, brooding silence by saying:

"If I had the fiftieth part of what's coming to Bennie, we could get married to-morrow, Stella. They say Absalom Jaggard was worth over a million."

She patted his shoulder, rather timorously.

"You are rich enough for me, Tom," she murmured. "And you would be, even if you didn't have a penny."

"Gee, you're great, Stella! You're wonderful. I'm not half good enough for you." Then, grinning over his shoulder at her: "I've been saving my pennies, old girl. Some day I'll have a couple of hundred of 'em. That's quite a pile, you know."

"Silly!"

"Anyhow, I'm richer than Absalom Jaggard. He hasn't a penny. Think of it. Lying up there in the Jaggard pri-

vate burying-ground, absolutely penniless. As poor as dirt."

"Let's not talk about the Jaggards, Tom."

"We saw the funeral from our house last Monday. Father and George and I sat on our side porch and watched them carry the coffin down the hill to the grave. Only one mourner. Just a single, solitary figure, walking all alone behind the coffin. No hearse, no carriages, no cars. We used to wonder why old Benjamin Jaggard put the family burying-ground so near to the house." He gave vent to a short laugh. "Now we know. It was simply to save the cost of a hearse and the pall-bearers' carriage. That's carrying economy to the bitter end, isn't it? Four of them are buried up there now. I suppose the day is bound to come when a Wayne will be carried out of that house and laid beside old Benjamin and the others. I hope I won't live to see *that*."

Stella said nothing. She knew that a Wayne would never be buried with the Jaggards. His sister had no place among them. She was a Jaggard cast-off. Another woman would go down to that burying-ground some day as Bennie's wife,—but not Barbara Wayne. Stella's eyes were blurred as she turned her face away.

Presently he spoke again, this time with boyish reluctance.

"I reckon we'd better turn around, Stella. I said I'd be back by five. I can't help wondering what the dickens the confab is all about. It wouldn't surprise me in the least if your father and the others are trying to induce my father to bury the hatchet and—and—well, make up with Barbara when she gets here. I wish to God he would, Stella. I wish we could all be down at the depot to welcome her with open arms. I'd hate like thunder to shake Bennie's hand but I'd do more than that if—if we could get Barbara back where I—where I could kiss her and—Oh, gosh! I'll be crying if I keep on like this. Hang on to your hat! I'm going to open her up, Stell!"

Meanwhile two separate conferences had taken place in

Hurdleford. One was coldly pacific, business-like and brief. The other lasted for nearly two hours after Shelby Wayne himself and John Primmer had held George Wayne while Dr. Higgs and the pastor searched for and found in a desk the revolver with which the young man was bent on destroying the last of the Jaggards. Suffice it to say, the story of Barbara's disgrace and her subsequent desertion by her lover had come to her father's ears that morning. An enterprising but impecunious lawyer in Hurdleford, one Johnson Q. Streamer, took it upon himself, after the hesitation and the deliberation natural in one who isn't quite certain whether he will be thanked or kicked for his generosity, drove out to the Wayne farm for the purpose of advising Barbara's father to take legal action in behalf of his daughter, now that young Jaggard was in a position to pay. His advice comprehended the employment of Johnson Q. Streamer as chief counsel in the cause. Breach of promise. . . . One hundred thousand dollars damages. . . . Heinous wrong satisfactorily righted. . . . Innocent young girl deceived by dastardly scoundrel. . . . Judgment inevitable. . . . Sure as shooting!

Mr. Streamer was neither thanked nor kicked by the shocked, incredulous father, but he was obliged to exercise decision and celerity in making his departure before that suddenly furious Southerner had time to get the double-barreled shotgun down from an upstairs bedroom. Shooting *would* have been sure if he had not been uncommonly spry. If not that, at any rate the dogs.

But the damage was done. Certain names had stuck in the dazed mind of Shelby Wayne: Eva Joslin, John Primmer, Dr. Higgs and others. He acted quickly. If it was a lie it had to be nailed at once. He telephoned to Primmer, Higgs, the Rev. Mr. Davidson and Judge Playden, asking them to meet him at three o'clock at his sons' place of business. The judge could not come, owing to an important engagement. Mr. Wayne was dismayed, for Judge Play-

den was the family lawyer and advisor. His sage, friendly counsel had more than once stood between the high-spirited Waynes and almost certain disaster. Never had he been needed so much as now—and he could not come.

On the way to town, Shelby Wayne reached the conclusion that it would be best not to have young Tom at the meeting. He was hot-headed, impetuous, unreasonable. Cool heads were needed. Tom would go wild with fury. He would be unmanageable. George was older, steadier; he would listen to reason. If there was any killing to be done, he, Barbara's father, was the one to do it. It was his right, his sacred duty, to kill Bennie Jaggard if he had wronged his daughter. It was not a job for Barbara's brothers. If any one was to be hanged for the slaying of his child's seducer, he must be the one. It was his right.

He thought it all out as he drove past the silent house on the hill and down into the streets of Hurdleford, with the result that it was he who kept the crazed, infuriated George from rushing out to shoot Bennie Jaggard; it was he who counseled delay until young Jaggard had been given a chance to speak for himself; it was he who said there must be no killing! He realized then and there that unless he succeeded in quieting his sons for the time being, one or the other of them would kill Bennie Jaggard, and that must never be. It was for him alone to face judge and jury for the murder of Barbara's seducer. He fought for Bennie's life in order that he might, in his own good time, take it himself.

In the offices of Playden & Crouse, five blocks away, Bennie Jaggard listened gravely to his father's will, ignorant of the tense scene that was taking place at the same time above the garage and show-room of the Wayne Brothers. He was conscious of a marked change in the manner of the family lawyers, however. They were reserved, rather abrupt and uncommonly business-like; there was a curious

air of aloofness, even uneasiness, attending the conference that did not fail to strike the client as significant. He sensed at the very outset that they wanted to get the business over with, to wash their hands of his affairs. They were not rude but they were insufferably polite,—which came to the same thing, thought Bennie.

He made up his mind then and there to take the family law business out of the hands of Playden & Crouse,—a course considerably simplified by the fact that Judge Playden's son Rufus had been taken into the firm. He did not like Rufus Playden and he knew that the latter did not like him,—indeed, he had an excellent reason for believing that the young lawyer hated him. Still, for that matter, he could well afford to regard Playden's enmity as something in the nature of a compliment; both of them had been suitors for the hand of Barbara Wayne, and he had won out.

Yes, he would get rid of Playden & Crouse in very short order.

Rufus Playden was several years his senior,—nearing thirty, in fact. He had gone first to a "fresh-water" college upstate and then had taken a law course in Chicago. At the time of Bennie's and Barbara's elopement and, for several months prior to that surprising event, he was "reading law" in his father's office preliminary to hanging out his own shingle, or perhaps following the path of least resistance by stepping into the established practice built up by Playden & Crouse. He pursued the latter course and was taken into the firm a few months after Barbara's flight.

If Hurdleford was stunned by Barbara's preference for Absalom Jaggard's son, whose courtship was not even suspected, the blow to Rufus Playden was staggering. He was absolutely unaware that he had a rival in the person of Bennie Jaggard. He was sure of Barbara. As a matter of fact, he had asked her to marry him only the night before she ran away. She had refused him, it is true, but he did

not by any means lose hope. He had unbounded confidence in himself. It was only a matter of time and, in a sense, persistence.

He loved her with all his soul, he had loved her since she was a girl in the high school, and she had always liked him. Almost up to the day she ran off with Bennie Jaggard, she appeared to favor him above all other suitors,—at least, he believed that to be so, and he was not alone in the conviction. Almost every one was saying that Rufus Playden had the “inside track.” His own father twitted him slyly about her, but in such a way that it did not take much of an eye to see that he approved of the match and confidently expected that one day Barbara would be his daughter-in-law.

And then came the bolt of lightning from a clear sky, laying waste all of Rufus’s hopes and plans. He not only had to endure the loss of the girl he loved but the pity of smirking townspeople as well. He smiled but his heart was sore; he held his head up but somehow he felt as if there was a knife in his back all the time.

He was a spare man, a trifle over medium height, and homely. His eyes were dark, expressive and singularly beautiful, making up for such defects as a narrow face, a thin nose with a pronounced Roman hump, a slightly twisted mouth of generous, even unattractive proportions; a sparse thatch of straight, sandy hair that defied his most determined efforts to keep it sleek and orderly, and a high forehead that would have stood for superior intellect anywhere save in Hurdleford, where it merely represented a physiological blemish.

But one forgot his homeliness when looking into his deep, intelligent eyes, for there one saw only beauty and honesty and purpose. They illumined an otherwise commonplace visage. His upper lip was long, his teeth large, white and regular. People agreed that while Rufus Playden was as sharp as a tack, he was at the same time, as dull as ditch water, for he was shy, studious, rather sedate and much too

ceremonious to cut much of a figure out in "society." Still, despite his social and physical shortcomings, it was generally supposed that he had won the affections of the beautiful and desirable Barbara Wayne.

When the heir to the Jaggard estate entered the private room off the Playden & Crouse offices, Rufus was seated at his desk near one of the windows, where he was busily engaged in writing. He looked up as their client came in with Judge Playden and Mr. Crouse. His only greeting was:

"How are you, Bennie?"

He did not rise, he did not offer to shake hands, nor did he smile. But, after completing a sentence, he laid down his pen and settled back in his chair, fixing his gaze on the face of the young man at his father's table.

"We shan't keep you long, Bennie," said Judge Playden, as he sat down opposite the young man and reached into a drawer for a long, thin envelope. "Everything is in order. It will not take a minute. Unless, of course, you wish to talk things over with us and——"

Bennie, balancing his hat on his knee in an upright position, curtly broke in:

"There is plenty of time for that, Judge Playden. We will take one thing at a time, if you don't mind."

He had sensed the unfriendly atmosphere and his eyes hardened. Judge Playden calmly withdrew the document from the envelope, smoothed it out and proceeded at once to the business in hand.

"This is your father's will. It is brief and to the point. There is nothing in it, I am sure, that will require elucidation or—ahem—explanation. Clear as a whistle and by no means ambiguous."

Bennie leaned back in his chair and listened attentively while the older man read the document. The provisions were few. Absalom made perhaps a dozen bequests to household servants and to the farmers who had "worked"

the Jaggard lands for years, the largest amount being one thousand dollars, the lowest one tenth of that. The Presbyterian Church was given \$25,000 outright. The residue was left to Benjamin Jaggard. One of the definite provisions was that the property was never to pass voluntarily out of the possession of his son or his son's heirs; he (or they) were directed to till, manage and personally conduct the farms and other enterprises for a continuous period not shorter than twenty years following the demise of the testator. Another provision,—it was not a request,—was that his son Benjamin should be buried in the Jaggard graveyard along with his "ancestors," (he employed that dignified word), and that his son's relict and children, in the event that they were legal offspring, should also find a last resting place among their forebears.

Bennie winced when these drastic conditions were pronounced. He started and then frowned as the intent and purpose back of these provisions became clear to him. His whole future came down with a crash. First of all, he would have to make his home on the farm for at least a score of years; he would be forced to abandon his cherished plan to live in New York or in Paris; and it would now be necessary for Barbara to return to Hurdleford and take up her residence with him in the house on the hill. More than all this, the child that was coming to them was bound in advance by the covering clause.

For twenty years they would have to live in Hurdleford! And when it was all over, they would have to be buried there! Nor could he sell or rent the far-stretching lands that came down to him from the tyrant who ruled over them although he was still and cold in his hillside grave.

Absalom had played a sharp trick on his son, after all, in return for the even sharper one to which he himself had been subjected. Somehow, to Bennie, it seemed a scurvy, underhanded trick. He felt himself turn hot all over with

sudden, blinding rage. His father had fixed it so that he could not run away from his inheritance; he had put him in fetters that would tie him far more securely than the family bonds he had broken so easily a year and a half ago.

When all was said and done, Absalom Jaggard had had but one thought in mind: his son, who had despoiled one Wayne, was to still live up there where he could look down on the rest of them.

Bennie was subtly aware of the smile that lurked in the eyes of Rufus Playden, although there was no sign of it visible; he could have sworn there was a chuckle in the calm, even voice of the reader. Suddenly he found himself looking squarely into Rufus's eyes and gloating. To himself he was saying:

"Laugh, you poor fish! I've got her. She belongs to me, damn you. You'd give your soul to have her,—and I've got her! Go ahead and laugh!"

Then he realized that Judge Playden was speaking directly to him. He pulled himself together.

"I beg pardon, Judge?" he muttered.

"I merely asked if it is all clear to you?" repeated the Judge, coldly.

"Oh, yes,—quite. It's very simple."

"Ahem! Is there anything more we can do for you this afternoon?"

The old man arose, folding the will as he did so. There was no mistaking his attitude toward his client. It was plainly inimical. Bennie got to his feet instantly, curbing his indignation with an effort. He grasped the situation. Judge Playden had never forgiven him for taking Barbara Wayne away from his son. He wanted to laugh in their faces.

"There is nothing more you can do for me," he said slowly, but with some emphasis.

"Am I therefore to understand that you will engage some one else to—er—to attend to probating your father's will and to represent you as executor?"

Bennie hesitated. This was serious. "You drew the will, didn't you, Judge Playden? I don't know just what to say in answer to your question, sir. Is there any reason why you should not continue to act as counsel for the Jaggards?"

He was surprised at himself for saying this, but he was suddenly conscious of being helpless without the aid and advice of this man who had always been the family counselor.

Judge Playden tapped his finger ends with the will several times before replying.

"Come in and see me to-morrow, Bennie. I have something to— No, on second thought, I will come up to the house to see you. Shall we say four o'clock?"

Mr. Crouse was standing. He fumbled nervously with his watch chain. Rufus had resumed his writing. A close observer would have noticed the way his fingers gripped the pen and the curious swelling of the veins in his temple.

"Four o'clock suits me," said Bennie, curtly, and walked out of the office.

CHAPTER SIX

ON A LATE SEPTEMBER NIGHT

DR. JOHN HIGGS and the Rev. Joseph Davidson hurried into the offices of Playden & Crouse a short time after Bennie's departure. They were greatly agitated.

"Is Bennie Jaggard here?" demanded the former, puffing from his efforts to keep pace with the lean, long-legged minister. They had traversed the five blocks with such unusual speed that people along the sidewalks paused to stare after them in no little concern.

Judge Playden was leaving the outer office as they entered.

"He left here fifteen or twenty minutes ago," was his reply. He did not remove his hat as he turned back with the two visitors. "What's up, John? Have the Waynes heard the story?"

"Yes. We've got to find Bennie at once and warn him," said the doctor. "We've been talking it over with Shelby and George. Tom came in just before we left. We had to tell him. He's almost out of his head. George can be reasoned with, but I don't believe Tom can be controlled. There's no time to lose. Bennie ought to get out of town immediately,—and stay away till things calm down. Where did he go?"

"I haven't the faintest idea. We let him see very plainly that we do not care to handle his affairs for him any longer. He left here with his nose in the air. I am to see him tomorrow afternoon at his house. That is all I can tell you about him. I should say that the wisest thing to do is keep watch on George and Tom Wayne. You are right. There is no time to lose. I will call up Jaggard's house and leave word for him to stay there until I arrive. I don't suppose

he has had time to reach home yet. Rufus has a great deal of influence with George and Tom. He'd better hurry down to see the boys at once. He may be able to talk some sense into them. Meanwhile, if you will go back to the garage and——"

"They're not at the garage," broke in the minister, mopping his white forehead. "They went off in one of their cars just before we left."

"George's idea," supplied the doctor. "He persuaded Tom to go off for a long ride with him, so that they could thresh the thing out for themselves, away from everybody."

"Do you know which way they went?" demanded the Judge quickly.

"Down the river road. Not over toward the Jaggard place," said Mr. Davidson. "I never was so upset in all my life. The thought of what might happen if they encounter Bennie Jaggard fills me with—ah—the most dreadful misgivings."

The Judge favored the man of cloth with a queer smile.

"I wonder, Mr. Davidson, just what you would do if you were young and met the scoundrel who had ruined your sister," he remarked.

"Bless my soul!" gasped the minister, staring. "You don't mean to imply that you think the Wayne boys would be justified in—in attacking Bennie Jaggard, Judge Playden?"

"I said nothing of the sort. I was merely wondering what you or I or the doctor here would do in the circumstances. I am not so sure that any one of us could be depended upon to exercise the reason that God gave us. I fear we should resort to the strength he put into our bodies."

"I—I wonder," murmured the pastor, as if to himself.

"We would see red, Mr. Davidson,—blood red,—all of us," said the Judge, moving over to the desk telephone. "We would want to kill, just as George and Tom want to kill

now." He turned suddenly. "How does Shelby Wayne take it? How does her father feel, Dr. Higgs?"

"He's crushed,—absolutely crushed. But he is more sensible than I thought he could possibly be. He begs the boys to go slow, to think, to do nothing rash. You'd better call Bennie up, Aleck, right away," he added impatiently. "Tell him to stay indoors. Tell him not to show his face till things cool down a little."

"It is only fair to warn him of the danger he is in," urged the minister, secretly dismayed by the fleeting vision he had had of himself a moment before. He saw himself beating a man to death.

Judge Playden's callers stood just inside the door, listening anxiously, intently while he talked over the telephone with the house on the hill. He spoke with the housekeeper, a Mrs. Robbins. She informed him that Mister Bennie had come home from town in a taxi a few minutes before and had just that instant driven off in his own automobile, evidently in a great hurry, announcing that he was going over to Radley, the county seat, and would not return until late in the evening. She was not to keep supper waiting for him.

"In a great hurry, you say, Mrs. Robbins?"

"Yes, sir. He seemed awfully upset and anxious about something."

"Anxious? How do you mean?"

"Well, Judge, he was wondering whether our old automobile would fall to pieces on the way."

"Oh, I see. That was all, eh?"

"Far as I could make out. He said he was going to get a new one this week. What was it you wanted of him, Judge?"

"A matter of business. Tell him when he gets back to call up my house without delay." The Judge hung up the receiver and turned to the two men. "Well," he began drily, "it seems that the best way to cool off is to go for an auto-

mobile ride. She says he has gone to the city. Probably to engage a new set of lawyers."

The doctor started. "By thunder, I hope the Wayne boys don't find out where he has gone and head him off on the way back."

"Not much danger of that. They're on one side of the river and he's on the other,—miles apart. Besides they do not know he has gone to the city."

"He ought to be back in Hurdleford by nine or ten o'clock," suggested the minister. "It is only a little over twenty miles there and back."

"I will ask Rufus to wait for the boys down at their garage," said the Judge. Opening the door to the back office, he called to his son. "Come here, Rufus. Things seem to be in a devil of a mess. You've got to get busy at once." He was frowning thoughtfully, judicially as he addressed the others.

"It is possible, gentlemen, that we are judging Bennie Jaggard too hastily. By we I mean all of us in Hurdleford. I assume that the story is pretty generally known and I take it that we have all formed an opinion. We should bear in mind, however, that Eva Joslin's story is unsupported. We are taking her word for statements made by Bennie to his father. We have no reason to believe, however, that she was incited to misrepresentation by personal animus or anything of the sort. I haven't the least doubt that she did hear Bennie tell his father over and over again that he was never married to Barbara and that he had abandoned her. We also know that Absalom Jaggard has made Bennie his sole heir. He was a bitter, unforgiving man. He would never have left his fortune to Bennie if there had been the slightest suspicion in his mind that the daughter of Shelby Wayne was to share it with him. Therefore we may take it for granted that Bennie made it very clear to him that Barbara is not his wife. That, of course, would account for the making of a new will and for the restoration of his son

to favor. Favor under the circumstances is a hard word. We need not go into that. What I am getting at is this: Absalom's change of heart is proof in itself that Eva Joslin actually did hear what she claims to have heard. Nevertheless, gentlemen, we may still be misjudging Bennie Jaggard. He may not be wholly to blame. It is even possible that his intentions were honorable. There may be another side to the story. Barbara Wayne may have refused to marry him, even though she ran away with him. She may have lived with him until she realized her mistake, until she came to know that she did not love him; she may even have left him to take up with some other man. That is not improbable, gentlemen, much as I hate to say it. Accepting it as a fact that she ran off with one man and lived with him without being legally wedded to him, it is not inconceivable that she might take a similar step in case—er—you see what I am getting at, gentlemen,—in case she took a fancy for another man.”

He was suddenly aware that his listeners were not looking at him. They were staring beyond him at Rufus Playden who stood in the open door behind him. The young man's face was deathly white; his horrified gaze was fixed on the speaker.

“Oh, Rufus,—come in,” said the Judge, glancing over his shoulder.

His son's eyes narrowed. “You know damned well, father, that that hasn't happened,” he said, in a low, tense voice. “Barbara isn't that kind of a girl. You know it, I know it,—we all know it. It's an infernal outrage, sir, to even suggest such a thing,—I say this to you, even though you are my father. A dirty, infernal, contemptible——”

“My boy!”

“I mean it! Every word of it. Barbara Wayne has been tricked and deceived by this filthy hound. It's cowardly of you to even intimate that she could be as base as——”

"Come, come, Rufus! I am not saying it," burst out his father, stiffening.

"You are trying to find an excuse for Bennie Jaggard. You are trying to make out a case for him. You are willing to vilify Barbara——"

"Hold your horses, Rufus," exclaimed Dr. Higgs. "Don't lose your head. Your father isn't defending Bennie, he isn't condemning Barbara, and you know it. He is trying to judge this thing impartially,—as a judge should. You ought to be ashamed of yourself, young man."

Color surged back into the blanched face of Judge Playden. He tried to smile.

"I don't blame you, Rufus, for—for jumping on me," he said, spreading his hands in a gesture of self-abnegation. "Your own good sense should tell you that my only motive, my only excuse for suggesting the possibility was that I want to be just."

"Please, father, don't say another word," cried Rufus, springing forward, his hand extended. "I am sorry, sir,—I am terribly ashamed of myself." His face was flushed, his gaze wavered and fell, his lips drooped like those of a child about to cry. "Please forget that I——"

"That's all right, my boy," broke in his father as he grasped the young man's hand. "Now let's talk sense," he went on crisply. "I want you to find the Wayne boys as soon as you can, Rufus, and reason with them. Better go down to their place and wait for them to come in. Appeal to their common sense, their judgment. Don't let them do anything rash."

"You say they went down the river road, Doctor?" inquired Rufus, taking his hat down from the rack.

"Yes."

"You know what that means. They've gone to Indian Park. They don't drink much, but once in awhile they hit it up a little. And it doesn't take much to affect either one of them."

"Yes, but liquor doesn't make rowdies of them," said his father. "They always behave like gentlemen."

"You never know what strong drink will do to a man," said the minister, didactically.

"Especially to a gentleman," remarked the doctor, who was wise. "Hurry along, Rufus. Get hold of 'em if you can. Head 'em off. I'm going over to the hotel. Shelby Wayne is there. He's probably in the bar."

"We've got our hands full," said Judge Playden.

Now Bennie's object in hurrying off to the county seat, ten miles away, was two-fold. In the first place he was irritable and not a little concerned by the attitude of Judge Playden and his partner. He decided that their reluctance to continue as his lawyers was due solely to Rufus's antipathy. It was his intention to put his affairs in the hands of a prominent firm in Radley; with this purpose in view he determined to see Mr. Cornell himself that very evening. He would have that gentleman or his representative at the house the next afternoon when Judge Playden called to see him. He was through with Playden & Crouse,—and Rufus.

His real object in going to the city, however, was to send a night letter to Barbara from the Western Union office there, informing her of his father's death and, in a vague but to her satisfactory way, acquainting her with the success of their enterprise. He would advise her that a letter, giving full details, would follow by post the next day. This letter, he knew, would be something of a shock—certainly a disappointment—to her. He wondered how she would receive the news that they would be forced to give up New York and come back to Hurdleford to live. They hadn't counted on anything so diabolical as that!

As he drove down the hill and past the Wayne home he suddenly realized how impossible the situation would be unless the present state of affairs was mended. It would be ghastly for all parties concerned if relations continued to exist as they were at present. Barbara's position would be

intolerable. Matters would simply have to be patched up if she was to live up there on the hill, within sight of her old home, almost within speaking distance of her father and brothers. Long before he reached the outskirts of Radley, he had decided upon a course of action. It was in direct opposition to all previous calculations; he had never even dreamed of taking the step he now contemplated; a few hours before he would have laughed at the mere thought of asking the Waynes to let bygones be bygones, of humbling himself and perhaps Barbara by appealing to them for forgiveness.

But it would have to be done. There was no other way out of it. He could not bring Barbara back to Hurdleford with things remaining as they were at present, and most certainly he could not allow her to make peace offerings while he skulked in the background and waited for the enemy to capitulate. That would be cowardly. Not only would the Waynes be justified in despising him, but he would despise himself as well. He flattered himself that he was not a coward.

So he took counsel with himself and came to a definite conclusion. He would go to Shelby Wayne that very night and ask him to forgive Barbara and to accept him as a son-in-law. He would tell him of the coming baby, of Barbara's real love for him and her brothers, and of the conditions imposed by his father's will. He would lay everything before Shelby Wayne, clean and fair,—everything, of course, except the conspiracy that brought about his own restoration,—but he would make it plain that he was asking no favors for himself; he was asking them only for Barbara's sake. He was a Jaggard and they would have to accept him as such. He could not change his spots. He could not become a Wayne. But, if they were willing, the feud could end then and there, so far as the Jaggards were concerned. He could promise that, for he was the only Jaggard left. The next one would be part Wayne.

This decision on his part caused him to change his plans about wiring Barbara that night. A day, perhaps two, would make no difference to her and by waiting he would no doubt be in a position to include the welcome, even longed-for, information that her father and brothers were ready and eager to receive her with open arms. That would be great! Nothing could make her happier than the receipt of such a telegram. Yes, he would wait until he was able to send her the joyous news. And besides,—there was a decided smack of self-interest in his calculations,—she would not be so likely to “go up in the air” when he wrote to her that an obligatory residence in Hurdleford was one of the terms of conquest.

He was unable to see Mr. Cornell, who was out of the city for the night. Leaving word at his house that he would drive over to see him in the morning, Bennie proceeded to the principal hotel where he had dinner.

Radley, the county seat, was a place of ten or twelve thousand inhabitants. The hotel, situated at a corner of the public square, reminded him of New York City in only one particular: it was called The Plaza. But, for that matter, the leading hotel in Hurdleford, a three-story frame structure, was known as the Hoffman House, in honor of a former proprietor, long since deceased, whose name was Brown and who had stopped at the Hoffman House in New York back in the Eighties. He couldn't very well put it on his tombstone that he had spent three days and nights at the then celebrated New York hostelry, but he *could* memorialize the event and also himself by changing the sign over his front door from the “Excelsior Hotel, Board and Lodging” to “The Hoffman House. Amos Brown, Proprietor.”

The Plaza had a barroom that not only was iniquitous but fashionable as well. You could get almost anything you wanted there. No matter what you asked for, the bartender would produce it for you, even though he never had heard of it before. If you were to step up to the bar

and ask for a Spitzbergen cocktail, he would not betray the slightest surprise or uneasiness. He would solemnly toss two or three ingredients into a shaker, jiggle it familiarly for a minute or so, and then pour you out a Spitzbergen. Connoisseurs, people who knew something about drinks, would have told you that he used precisely the same ingredients in mixing a Martini, a Manhattan, a Clover, an Orange-blossom or any of a dozen other concoctions. He had plenty of liquor to experiment with in those days and he had no secrets.

So when Bennie Jaggard, feeling the need of spirituous support, or perhaps it may have been encouragement to a feeble jubilation, ordered a Manhattan cocktail before going in to dinner,—he chose a Manhattan instead of a Martini for sentimental reasons,—“Joe” shook him up a very good one out of his magical bottles and blandly, confidently waited for him to say, “Make me another one, please.”

His customer did not disappoint him. He had three before he went to the dining-room. He hoped they wouldn’t die on him before he saw Shelby Wayne. In any case, they made the task ahead of him look far easier than before; for the time being, they gave him a courage that bordered on bravado. Moreover, they inspired him with that genial disregard for thrift so common to gentlemen pleasantly and jauntily affected by two or three cocktails,—no more than three.

During the solitary dinner, he decided to completely refurnish and redecorate Barbara’s bed-chamber in the house on the hill, and to have it ready for occupancy when she arrived from the east; he would buy her a handsome, high-powered automobile—yes, he would order it through the Wayne boys; he would have four servants in the house instead of two,—one of them a trained butler; the largest of the upstairs rooms would be turned into a bang-up nursery; he would build a studio for himself out near the barn.

And if it would please her and the family, he would name the baby Shelby.

He was very generous and magnanimous and somewhat lordly by the time he was ready to start home. This condition held for the greater part of the distance. The cocktails did not "die" on him until he came in sight of the lamp-lit house of the Waynes.

It was nearly nine o'clock. There was no moon; the night was black and there was a gusty early fall wind blowing. He slowed up uncertainly as he neared the Wayne front gate; then he increased the speed and shot by, actuated by a sudden resolve to leave the car at home and stroll down to see Mr. Wayne. He decided—and he knew the decision was a weak and flimsy one—that Mr. Wayne might notice that he had been drinking a little. A little walk would be a good thing.

He ran the car into the barnyard and started off briskly down the private lane toward the highway without entering the house or communicating with Mrs. Robbins, who having received her instructions from Judge Playden was waiting for him in the sitting-room. She heard him drive up and assumed that he would come in presently.

Just before he reached the mouth of the little lane he encountered a man. It was too dark for him to recognize the black, almost indistinct figure, but he knew who it was the instant he heard the voice. It was Rufus Playden.

"I would like a few words with you, Jaggard," said Rufus, in a low voice.

"All right, but be quick with it, Rufe. I am in a hurry."

Meanwhile, an hour or so earlier, the Wayne boys had returned to Hurdleford. They had been drinking, not heavily, it is true, but enough to make them surly and resentful of friendly attempts on the part of several well-meaning citizens to engage them in conversation. They repaired at once to the bar of the Hoffman House, where George, after inquiring when their father had left the place, ordered two

highballs served to himself and Tom at a little table over in one of the corners of the room. There were half a dozen men in the saloon at the time.

"Better not drink any more, George," advised the bar-keeper. "You've had enough already."

"Since when have you become a temperance preacher, Schultz?" inquired George coldly.

"That's all right, now, George," placatively. "Don't get sore. I know when——"

"You're a nice one to talk," sneered Tom. "There isn't a night that you don't pour liquor down men's throats as long as they can hold their heads up and ask for it."

"Well, they've had enough, ain't they?" exclaimed Schultz, facetiously. "Don't that prove I know when a feller's got enough?"

"Am I to understand that you think we're drunk?" demanded George, after a moment, fixing Schultz with a steady, hostile gaze. "If you don't want my patronage, just say so, and be done with it. I am not in the habit of being insulted by——"

"Now, now, George! Don't get on your ear. I'm only advising you for your own good. Let the stuff alone for to-night. I am your friend and I wouldn't insult you for the world. You know me, George. If you boys was hard, regular booze-fighters I wouldn't say a word, but you ain't. You——"

"Are you going to give us what we're asking for?" broke in Tom, hotly.

Schultz considered. "I guess one won't hurt you," he said, rather meekly. "What's it to be? Beer? That's what you usually take when you come in, so I guess——"

"Rye highballs," said George, curtly and with finality. "Bring the bottle over here to this table. And, say, we're only going to have one, so don't you worry about having to drag us out later on."

Tom laid his brawny, clenched fist on the bar and leaned forward the better to impress Schultz with his earnestness.

"We make a point of keeping strictly sober when we've got business to attend to. That's one of our rules, understand?"

The barkeeper started. "What business you got on hand for to-night, Tom?" he inquired quickly, removing his fingers from the bottle on the bar shelf.

"Bring it over here to this table," said George, gruffly.

Other customers who had collected at the bar ordered drinks unexpectedly, and watched out of the corners of speculative eyes the two silent young men who sat over in the corner and moodily agitated the ice in their tall glasses between infrequent draughts. Tom's long figure slouched down in the chair; his chin was on his chest, his legs crossed, his frowning gaze fixed unseeingly on the floor over at the untenanted corner of the long bar. George's elbow rested on the table, his square chin in the cup of his hand. He too seemed to be buried in deepest thought. From time to time his eyes were lifted from the brownish glass for a swift glance at his younger brother's face. No one bothered them. There was something about their singular aloofness that forbade convivial or even casual advances, notwithstanding that all these men knew them well and were in the habit of chatting with them on familiar, easy terms.

Presently George drained his glass and instantly poured another stiff drink out of the bottle. Tom looked up, scowling.

"Cut it out, George," he said, sharply and distinctly. The command was audible to the group at the bar.

His brother paused as he laid his hand on the siphon.

"I guess you're right," said he, after a moment of indecision. He pushed the glass away. "Go on and finish yours if you want it. No more. We've had enough. Hurry up and let's be going."

Here one of the listeners, perceiving with rare acumen that there was no likelihood of his invitation being accepted, called out:

"Have another on me, boys? We're having one all around."

"No, thanks," responded George.

"Just a little one?" insisted the other, almost pleadingly, emboldened by the conviction that they would not accept. It cost a quarter at the Hoffman House bar for two rye highballs.

Tom shook his head. "Not for me, Sam. I'm on the wagon."

"You're what? With an empty glass standing in front of you?"

"Well, it's empty, isn't it?" said Tom, with a short, hard laugh. "I meant what I said. I'm on the wagon."

"Fill 'em up again, Schultzie," said Sam, with a spacious wave of his hand. "The wagon hasn't got around to us. Have one yourself, Schultzie?"

"I don't drink and you know it," said the barkeeper. Then with a palliative guffaw: "I'm the driver of the water wagon, gents. I haven't even got off to unhitch for fourteen years. Six beers, gents?"

A few minutes later the Waynes got up from the table. George was observed to feel quickly of his right hip pocket as he pushed back his chair. Then he strode over and tossed a coin on the bar. Without a word to any one, he followed Tom through the swinging doors.

"Say," began one of the crowd, excitedly but cautiously; "I wonder if they've heard that story about their sister?"

"Wouldn't surprise me. It's all over town."

"I'll swear George has a gun in his hip pocket. I saw something bulging there."

"Their old man was in here just before supper," volunteered Schultz, nervously. "I've got it purty straight that

he's wise. He had three or four stiff ones, without chasers, and his hand shook like hell. What makes me think he knows was Doc Higgs coming in here sort of nervous and leading him out by the arm, whispering to him all the time. By gosh, I thought old Shelby was going to soak him in the eye before he got through with it. Something's up, gents, sure as you're alive."

A number of people saw the Waynes come out of the bar by the street entrance and stride off side by side, their heads bent and their shoulders hunched forward in marked contrast to their customary carriage. Some of these observers made note of the fact that the boys failed utterly to respond to polite, even jovial greetings as they swung past within a scant arm's length, and others remembered seeing them stop on a corner and argue earnestly but in subdued undertones with each other. One man was positive he saw George "cross his heart," an act that signified more than the most solemn oath ever administered in court so far as real fidelity to honor was concerned. Once they came to a standstill in the middle of a dark, poorly lighted block, and a citizen who had stopped under a street lamp some distance away to set his watch by the town clock which was then in the very midst of striking eight (he was thus perfectly able to "identify" the time to the second), witnessed the extraordinary spectacle of two brothers shaking hands with each when he knew for a positive fact that they had not been separated for at least two blocks. (He could swear to that, because he had kept behind them most of the time,—“sort of curious-like.”)

The boys stopped at the garage long enough to get into their car which was standing out in front. One of the helpers called out from the doorway as they started off, George at the wheel:

“Goin’ home now?”

He received no answer. The car swung recklessly around

a corner two blocks above and headed in the direction of the bridge spanning the river. In other words, according to the helper, they were homeward bound.

No one in Hurdleford remembered seeing them after that, at least not to recognize them. As a matter of fact, they went straight home. Tom got down from the car clumsily as it drew up near the side porch. He went directly into the house and upstairs to his room without pausing to see whether his father was in the front sitting-room, where there was a light. Going to his bureau he took a revolver from an upper drawer and hastily, apprehensively jammed it into his coat pocket. On second thought, urged by the sudden suspicion that his father might have anticipated this very thing, he jerked it out again and made sure that the cartridges had not been removed. Then he walked quickly downstairs and entered the sitting-room.

His father was not there. For a moment or two he blinked his eyes and then strode over to the window to see if he had joined George in the barn lot. Up to this time he had been breathing heavily, thickly, but now he made a partially successful effort to steady himself, to get his nerves in hand. He heard George speaking to the dogs, crossly,—which was most unusual for him,—but there was nothing to indicate that his father was out there with him. Good! He would not have to face his father, after all. No one but George,—and he could deceive old George all right enough,—indeed, he flattered himself that he had already pulled the wool over his eyes. He waited a few moments, taking long, deep breaths, and then stepped out upon the side porch to meet his brother. A glance upward revealed a light in his father's bedroom window. He had not thought of looking up there before.

George was standing in the walk, some distance from the porch steps. The light from the door revealed his figure.

"Father's gone upstairs, I guess," said George, a little huskily.

"I reckon so. He's not in the sitting-room."

George was silent for a long time. Tom remained on the porch.

"It's too early to go to bed," mumbled the former at last.

"I was thinking of taking a walk to—to sort of get calmed down, George. I'm all shot to pieces. I can't stand talking to anybody or being with anybody, not even you, George, and I can't bear being here in the house,—not just now, anyhow. Listen; I'll walk down the road a couple of miles. Maybe that will help, maybe it will steady me. You——"

"Look here, Tom," broke in his brother, coming forward; "what are you up to?"

"Nothing! We've promised each other, haven't we? If you're afraid I'm going after that—say, I've given my word, haven't I? What more do you want? I've taken yours, haven't I? I'm not doubting you, am I?"

"Don't speak so loud! You'll have father coming down here in a minute. Listen now, Tom. You've promised not to do anything to-night,—and so have I. We've got to stick to it, kid. It's settled. I am to see him to-morrow and get the truth out of him. Not to-night, remember. I am in no frame of mind to do it now. I couldn't control myself. We'll both be cooler to-morrow than we are to-night. And you've got my promise that I won't take a gun with me when I tackle him in the morning. I'm not going to take any advantage of you, understand that, Tom."

"Oh, I understand that all right," said young Tom gruffly. "I'm not doubting you, am I? Have I said anything that would lead you to think I doubted you?"

"No, you haven't."

"Well, then, let's not say anything more about it. I'll be back when I get good and ready. Maybe I'll walk all night. Don't you worry, George. I'll stick to the bargain."

Then George said something quite remarkable. "I'm not saying that we're going to give Bennie Jaggard a chance, Tom, but, by God, we've got to give each other a chance."

Tom pondered this. "I get you, George," he said, after a moment. Then: "Say, where are you going?" he demanded quickly, as his brother moved off toward the barn.

"Oh, I can't go to bed yet. Besides I don't want father to see that I've been drinking. He'd notice in a second, and he—he begged us not to touch a drop to-day. You go ahead and take a good long walk, Tom. Sober up. We've had a little too much, both of us. I'm going down to the pasture and walk it off. And I want to be alone, so don't come with me. See you later."

He disappeared in the darkness. Tom waited a few minutes, listening to his heavy, unsteady footsteps, and then strode,—or rather slunk,—out of the yard into the turnpike. Several hundred yards down the road he stopped short, listened intently. Assured that his brother was not dogging his footsteps, he darted stealthily across the weedy roadside ditch, climbed the stake-and-rider fence and dropped into the vast stubble-field belonging now to Bennie Jaggard. For some time he stood there gazing up at the faraway blocks of light in the windows of the house on the hill—two mellow stars that somehow refused to stand still against the wall of inky black, no matter how hard he strove to fix his giddy eyes upon them.

He realized in a dull sort of way that he would have to steady himself if he expected to carry his plan to a successful conclusion. With this thought in mind, he swung off across the rough, parched wheat-field, determined to walk until his brain was clearer. His course took him farther away from the Jaggard house. From time to time he looked over his shoulders at the lighted windows, eager to see whether they were becoming stationary. All the time his hand was in his coat pocket, tightly gripping the pistol.

The wind had increased in velocity. It picked up wisps of straw and flung them in his face as he plunged directly into the teeth of it. After a long while his brain began to

clear, and to his amazement he found himself considering the compact he had made with George, the promise he meant to violate even as he gave it. He thought of his brother pacing the dark pasture racked as he was racked, but always firm and square and honest—aye, George would live up to his promises. George wanted to kill Bennie Jaggard as much as he did, but he would play the game, he would stick to his word.

Coming to a huge, sheltering straw-stack, Tom threw himself down upon the ground and burst into tears. He was giving way to something that was far stronger than impulse: his word of honor.

Down in the black meadow-land, a mile or more away, George Wayne was conquering himself in much the same fashion. He too had made a compact he intended from the beginning to violate. But, like Tom, he weakened as his sense of fairness strengthened, and there in the darkness he stretched himself out on his face and wept.

The wind blew toward the house on the hill and Hurdleford. On still nights or with the wind from the other direction, the clock in the tower of the town-hall could be distinctly heard as it struck the hours. But to-night the autumn gale blew the familiar sound away to the west. The rustle of clover, the swish of the trees in the little grove not far away, the clatter of an open barn door swinging angrily on its hinges,—those were the only sounds George Wayne would have heard if he had been listening for them or was aware of them.

And so neither of the Wayne boys, sobering avengers, heard the crack of a pistol on the crest of the wind-swept hill.

Almost at the very instant that Tom Wayne threw himself down at the base of the straw-rick, Rufus Playden, blocking Bennie Jaggard's path, was saying:

"It's about Barbara. I want the truth out of you. What has become of her?"

Bennie actually chuckled. "Don't you wish you knew?" he exclaimed, tauntingly.

"I intend to know," said the other, in quiet, level tones.

"Well, you'll know soon enough, Rufe," shot back the other, a hot wave of anger sweeping over him. "You attend to your own business and leave mine alone. Understand me? I don't want to have anything more to do with you. You can go to hell, so far as I'm concerned,—the whole pack of you."

"Where is Barbara?"

"Look here, what do you mean by coming up here this time of night and tackling me——"

"Are you going to answer my question?"

"Yes. I'll answer it. It's none of your damned business. Is that answer enough?"

"I suppose it's none of my business that you dragged that poor girl down to the——"

"Cut it out, Rufe! Don't go too far. I'll knock your head off if you go making any cracks like that. Oh, I know what you all said. You said I wasn't good enough for her. All right! I wasn't. But just the same she did go away with me. That ought to hold you! You thought you had her, didn't you? Well, you didn't, you poor simp! She wouldn't wipe her feet on you!"

Playden was silent for a moment or two. When he next spoke it was with deadly calmness. "I don't suppose she had the slightest idea that you were going to wipe your feet on her."

"What do you mean by that?"

"There is no need for me to tell you. You know well enough, Bennie."

"Get off of my place! If you don't get out of here, I'll kick you out!"

"Oh, no, you won't! I'm not a defenseless girl. I'm not a woman. You won't kick *me* out."

"All I've got to say to you, Playden, is that you're a rotten loser. You can't get over the fact that she took me instead of you. Why can't you be a man and take it like a man? Why——"

"Don't whine! Don't try to soft-soap me. I'm not thinking about myself now. I'm thinking about Barbara. You've ruined her life, you've dragged her down to the gutter. Listen to me! I'm asking you for the last time. What have you done with her? Where is she?"

"And I repeat,—*none of your damned business!*" shouted Bennie furiously, drawing back his fist.

The revolver in Rufus Playden's hand was almost touching Jaggard's breast when he pulled the trigger. A streak of flame shot out, a loud report, a surprised grunt,—and Barbara's husband crumpled up at the side of the road, a bullet through his heart.

CHAPTER SEVEN

RUFUS PLAYDEN TAKES A CLIENT

SHORTLY after seven o'clock the next morning, Judge Playden flung open his son's door without knocking and, in a greater state of excitement than he had ever been known to exhibit before, rushed across to the bed and violently shook the young man's shoulder.

"Rufus! Wake up! Something terrible has happened. Get up instantly. Do you hear? Wake up!"

Rufus Playden had finally fallen asleep a scant half hour before daybreak. He had lain for hours in pitch darkness, his eyes wide open, his heart thumping wildly or weakly by turns, his body cold and moist and sometimes shivering, his brain in a turmoil of fear, triumph, dismay, exaltation, defiance, dread, self-glorification, abasement. At the first sound of his father's voice he opened his eyes and jerked himself up on one elbow, expecting to behold other men in the room or at the door. For a moment he blinked incredulously. Then he sank back upon the pillow, every vestige of strength gone from his body. He was wide awake—amazingly wide awake. It was as if he had not been asleep at all. In fact, he was quite unaware that he had lost consciousness even for a moment. He had heard the town clock strike six; the boom of the bell carried a sinister, ominous sound that had been lacking in the dead hours of night,—no, it was not that precisely:—it seemed mournful, subdued, almost muffled, as if it were tolling for some one instead of brazenly clanging the time of day. Daylight was coming through the slats of his window shutters as the clock struck six. Even as his mind became blank he wondered if they had found Bennie Jaggard's body up at the farm, now that the sun was up and shining.

His father was still speaking: "Here, I say; don't go to sleep again. Get up! We have to go to the jail immediately."

Rufus actually sighed. He was not at all surprised.

"All right, father. Are they waiting?"

"It's horrible,—terrible. God knows I did my best to warn him. Are you awake? They got Bennie Jaggard last night."

"Just as soon as I can get into my clothes, I'll——" He stopped short, squinting his eyes as if he had not heard aright. "What did you say?"

"Hurry up and dress. I will meet you at the jail. Shelby Wayne routed me out a few minutes ago. He's downstairs. Both of his boys are in custody. They killed Bennie Jaggard last night."

As the door closed quickly behind his father, Rufus recovering from the stupefaction that had momentarily dulled every faculty, scrambled frantically out of bed. His legs seemed curiously paralyzed, his knees wobbled beneath him. He clutched the foot of the bed to keep from falling, and although his cry was no more than a hoarse, strangled whisper he believed he was screaming loudly enough to be heard in the street:

"But they didn't do it! I did it! They didn't do it! What the hell's the matter with you?"

His legs gave way and he sank to the bed, still clutching the foot-rail. He tried again to rise and rush after his father, but a sharp, agonizing pain in his side caused him to straighten his body and throw back his head, wheezing for breath.

"Good God! What's the matter with me?" he gasped, pressing his hand to his side.

He forgot the Wayne boys and Bennie Jaggard and everything else in the terror that suddenly succeeded bewilderment. His heart! After a while,—many minutes,—he found himself gripping the bedpost with a rigid right hand,

his left pressed tightly to his breast, his face dripping wet, his body strangely limp, as if it had wilted. He was muttering to himself—for he was thinking of nothing then except himself:

"Gosh! That was a close shave. I—I thought I was gone. It's better,—it's easier. It's not so bad. No, it's not so bad. Lord! It was like a knife right in my heart." He spoke as if some one were in the room listening to him. "Yes, thank God, it's letting up. It's a lot easier now. I can breathe. Yes, that was a good, deep one,—and it didn't hurt nearly so much. Not nearly. Take it easy now. Don't move too quickly. I wonder if it was my heart. I thought I was a goner. It nearly——"

Presently he ceased mumbling. The pain was gone but he was weak and trembly. He was able to think of something else. He could think of the incredible, astonishing thing his father had said. "They killed Bennie Jaggard last night." The Wayne boys were in jail,—in jail for killing Bennie Jaggard. How could they be in jail for killing Bennie Jaggard when they had nothing at all to do with it? Gradually he began to grasp the situation. On suspicion! That was it. They suspected George and Tom. That could mean but one thing: no one suspected him. At least, not yet. After all, why should they suspect him? He had no real reason for killing Bennie. They had. Of course, they had. It was only natural that they should be suspected. He found himself laughing,—a dry, mirthless little snicker. What a joke! He could straighten it all out in a jiffy; he could clear it up in ten seconds. All he had to do was to walk down to the jail and say: "I did it." For that matter, he could use the telephone.

But wait! Here was something to think about, something to consider. For a long time he sat on the edge of the bed, his eyes narrowed, his lips drawn tightly over his teeth in what might have been described as a smile stamped and left there by a spasm that had passed and was forgotten.

In the light of all that followed, it is only fair to Rufus Playden to say that in the beginning he had had no thought of shirking the consequences of his crime. It had never entered his calculations to deny his guilt. He alone was responsible for Bennie's death and he alone intended to pay the penalty. When he entered the house an hour or so after the encounter in the lane it was with the resolve to go to his father at once and confess; he was firm in his intention to give himself up to the law. As a matter of fact, his last thought before dropping off into an exhausted sleep was of walking down to the marshal's office with his father the first thing in the morning to surrender himself to that official. He had thought it all out: the imprisonment without bail, the trial, the conviction and the punishment. He was ready for all that. But his father was asleep when he paused outside the bedroom door, listening.

Well, the news could wait till morning. He would spare his father that night. The morning would do. He had deliberately, willfully set out to kill Bennie Jaggard for the thing he had done to the girl he worshiped. No mistake about that. The deed was premeditated. There had been no other purpose in his mind when he went boldly up to the house on the hill. He went there to shoot Bennie down as he would have slain a dog. And he had done that very thing.

But now the unexpected had happened. Here was something to think about. Why hurry? Why not hold off a bit? Nothing could happen to George and Tom Wayne. That was unthinkable, of course. Suppose—here he sat bolt upright on the side of the bed and held his breath—suppose they were to be put on trial for the murder! Why, even then they would not be in jeopardy. Nothing could happen to them. He could clear them with a word. All he would have to do would be to step forward, calmly proclaim the truth, and—they were free.

There was no real cause for haste; he could take his time

about it, he could dress as slowly as he pleased, he could stroll down to the lock-up and—why, for that matter, he could lie down again if he wished and rest, pull his nerves together, give his heart—or whatever it was—a chance to regain its—— Aye, his heart! He couldn't risk another attack like that. It was something fierce,—he had been sure for a few seconds that he was a goner. And this put a sickening thought into his head.

Suppose he were to die suddenly like that,—all alone,—without being able to tell any one that he had killed Bennie Jaggard.

What would become of the Wayne boys then? Unless they had an indisputable alibi—why, good God, the most horrible of all things might occur. He sank back on the bed, his feet touching the floor, breathing deeply, testing his still fluttering heart.

For a long time he lay there; the pain was almost unnoticeable. In a little while it would be perfectly safe for him to get up and put on his clothes and go downstairs.

His mind was working clearly now. He had it in hand, so to speak. He could reason with it. And presently it began to create something so foreign to all that had gone before, to all that had charged it up to the genesis of this new and amazing idea, that he experienced a queer little feeling of guilt entirely apart from that which he meant to confess. It grew. He did not want to do so, but he encouraged it just the same. In a little while he was considering the idea seriously and strangely enough with wonder rather than with repugnance. Its possibilities were almost staggering. He began to balance—the doubts against the chances.

It was fully an hour later that the old family servant came to his door and rapped. He was still lying on the bed, undressed.

“Well?” he called out.

"It's a telephone from your father. He wants to know if you're coming."

"Tell him I'm sick. I've had an attack of some kind. It's my heart, I think, Mary."

Mary opened the door instantly.

"Good gracious, Rufus!" she cried, staring in alarm at the figure on the bed. "Are you—are you bad?"

"Don't come in. I'm getting over it. I'll be all right in a little while. Go and tell father——"

"Shall I send for Dr. Higgs? If it's your heart he'd better see you at once."

This gave Rufus Playden a fresh idea. "I don't know but what you'd better ask him to come around, Mary. I—I was going to get up, but I suppose it would be safer to wait till he's had a look at me."

"I'll call him this instant," broke in the agitated woman and she rushed off precipitately.

"Don't forget to tell father not to be alarmed," shouted Rufus.

He changed his position on the bed. In his eyes there was a bright, alert, even crafty gleam, and to himself he was saying:

"I can always step forward with the truth if the worst should come. No jury on earth would convict them for killing the man who ruined their sister. But even if it did come to that, I can save them. It's worth trying. There is no proof against me. Nobody saw it. Nobody knows I was up there. It will be circumstantial evidence against the boys anyhow. I'll wait. I'll see what turns up. Thank God, I kept my mouth shut last night,—and this morning. No, they'd never bring in a verdict of guilty against George and Tom. No jury would. Public sentiment is with them. Everybody loved Barbara, everybody likes George and Tom. Everybody said Barbara's brothers ought to kill Bennie Jaggard. But what chance would I have? There would be no excuse for me. I had no right to kill him. I wouldn't

have a chance with a jury. I'll wait. I'll see how things go. No harm in waiting."

He began to cry. Now that he saw a means of escape, his courage forsook him. He whimpered like a frightened child.

But he was calm when Dr. Higgs hurried in fifteen or twenty minutes later.

"I don't know what happened to me, Doctor," he explained in answer to the quiet, professional queries of the physician. "Something got me right here. It was awful. I suppose it was the sudden shock. Do you think my heart's bad? I never had anything like it before."

After a brief but apparently thorough examination the doctor smiled, put up his stethoscope, and said:

"Indigestion, probably. Nothing to worry about. Your heart is as sound as a dollar, Rufus. Lungs all right. No doubt the news did cause a sort of spasm, coming suddenly like that. You mean the news about Bennie Jaggard, of course."

"Yes. I was sound asleep. Father woke me and told me. It's terrible, isn't it?"

"Terrible. But I am not surprised. I expected it."

Rufus hesitated a moment. "Tell me all about it. What do you know? Where did it happen?" He was conscious of a nauseating sensation in the pit of his stomach. Something cold swept over him from head to foot. He wondered if his face betrayed anything.

Dr. Higgs sat down. He took his time about it.

"Mrs. Robbins called me a little before twelve o'clock last night. When I got up to the lane I found Marshal Connelly and half a dozen men there, standing around Bennie's body. It was lying at the side of the road. He had been shot through the heart. There was nothing I could do. Mrs. Robbins and the Hinkle girl who works up there say they heard Bennie drive his car into the barn lot a little before nine. Dick Carr, the hired man, came up from

town about ten. He can't say whether Bennie was lying there at the time, because it was very dark and besides that, he was walking on the other side of the road. Mrs. Robbins thought it was Bennie out on the side porch when Dick stopped for a minute or two on his way to his room over the tool-house near the barn. Absalom Jaggard added a couple of rooms there, you know, for the hands. Andy Peterson has the other room. Mrs. Robbins called down the stairs to Dick, thinking it was Bennie. She wanted to tell him to call up Judge Playden on the 'phone. Dick says he went on to bed and it was after eleven when he heard the Hinkle girl outside the tool-house calling up to him and Andy. To make the story short, he got up and dressed,—so did Andy, who had been asleep for hours,—and went up to the house. Mrs. Robbins was worried. She said Bennie hadn't come in and she was sure Judge Playden wanted him on urgent business. Besides, she had heard something that sounded like a shot down by the gravel road a couple of hours earlier, but thought it was an automobile back-firing. Andy Peterson is sure now that he heard it too, but was only half awake and didn't pay any attention to it. Mrs. Robbins was uneasy. She had heard some of the talk about what the Wayne boys might do if they met Bennie. So she made Dick and Andy go out and have a look around the place. They finally found him down the lane, not far from the gravel road."

He paused, wetting his lips. Rufus, eyeing him intently, seemed scarcely to be breathing.

"Dead?" he asked, almost in a whisper.

"As a door nail," said the doctor. "They had sense enough not to disturb the body,—it beats all how much brains the ignorant sometimes have,—and hurried to the house to notify the marshal. Then Mrs. Robbins called me. As I said before, there was nothing I could do. The bullet had gone through his heart. Only one bullet was necessary."

Rufus, resting on his elbow, ventured the enquiry: "Were there any signs of a struggle?"

"Apparently not. Martin Connelly is of the opinion Bennie was waylaid and shot down without a chance to defend himself."

"I can't understand it. That doesn't sound like either of the Wayne boys. They're not—they're not cowards."

"It certainly was a cowardly act," announced the doctor, compressing his lips.

"When did they arrest George and Tom?" asked Rufus, after a moment or two.

"Just before daybreak, I understand. Martin Connelly telephoned to the coroner and the sheriff before he took any definite steps. He stated his suspicions and the sheriff ordered him to act at once. The sheriff is in Hurdleford now. He got here an hour ago and so did the coroner and the prosecuting attorney. They've got the boys in Connelly's office, questioning them."

"Oh, my Lord!" groaned Rufus, starting up from the bed. This was more than he could stand. He was on the point of breaking. "I'm going down there at once. Don't try to stop me. It's——"

"Careful,—careful, Rufus," warned the doctor, placing his hands on the young man's shoulders. "Don't get excited. Remember what happened a little while ago. Take it cool. Take your time. There is nothing you can do."

Rufus stared blankly. "Nothing I can do? What do you mean by that?"

"I mean they will not allow you to see the boys yet. Your father is down there with Shelby Wayne, but the officers won't let them get near the boys for the present. Take my advice, Rufus. Stay in bed for a while. Lie quiet. I mean it. In fact, I insist. Have a bite of breakfast brought up to you. Don't eat much. Take it slow," pursued the doctor, crisply, authoritatively. "Stay right here.

I will see your father and tell him you're all right. I'm going to leave a few of these pills for you to take. Strychnine. They'll fix you up. One every three hours. Take one——"

"But I've just got to do something! Darn it all, do you suppose I can lie here on my back while——"

"You will do as I tell you," broke in Dr. Higgs sharply.

Rufus sank back with a groan. "See here, Dr. Higgs, I simply can't bear it. There's only one thing for me to do. I've got a little manhood left in my——" This was as near as he ever came to telling the truth about the murder of Bennie Jaggard. He was cut off by his listener at the beginning of a downright confession.

"Don't you worry about George and Tom. There isn't a jury in this county that would convict them. I would stake my life on it. So don't you worry about them, Rufus. If you're going to do any worrying, my boy, just worry a little about yourself."

"Eh!" gasped the other, startled.

"It doesn't amount to anything, mind you, but you'd be foolish to risk another attack, just the same. Your pulse is quick. You stay right where you are. I will come back in an hour or so and have another look at you. If you're all right then, I'll let you get up."

"Wait a minute," commanded Rufus as the doctor neared the door. "What makes you think they can't be convicted?"

"Why, there isn't a man in this county who would hang them or even send 'em up for shooting Bennie Jaggard after what he did to their sister. It—it isn't human nature, that's all."

"Do you really believe that?" cried Rufus eagerly, almost wistfully.

"Absolutely. If you were on a jury, would you convict them for killing Bennie Jaggard?"

Rufus did not answer this question. He swallowed hard but said nothing.

"I wouldn't," continued the doctor. "And neither would anybody else I know."

"Don't go yet," begged the other. "Have you seen George and Tom?"

"Yes. I was down at the jail when they brought them in."

"What—what have they got to say?"

"They won't say a word, either of them. They just simply stand and look at each other and refuse to talk."

"Don't they deny it?"

"They don't say anything, I tell you. Not a word. They seem sort of stunned. Last I saw of them, they were going into the marshal's office with their arms around each other's shoulders."

"But only one shot was fired. They couldn't both have fired it."

"That's the point,—just the point. We'll probably never know which one fired it. They'll never tell, Rufus,—never in the world. They'd die first. They're that kind."

"Yes,—they're that kind," mused Rufus, almost inaudibly. Then loudly: "I guess you're right, Doctor. They'll never be convicted. We can't allow that to happen. We'll see to that, all right."

"I forgot to mention that the marshal and his men had to wait till nearly sunrise before the boys came home. They'd been out all night. George came in first. He had been tramping for hours, they think. Tom turned up a little later. Evidently slept in a straw stack. In the meantime, Shelby Wayne had been aroused with difficulty from a drunken sleep. He collapsed when he heard what had happened. Seems dazed even now, but no doubt it's partially due to the liquor. Their hired girl said he sat up in his room till long after midnight, waiting for the boys to come in. She could hear him walking the floor. They found

an empty whiskey bottle on the bureau, with the corkscrew still sticking in the cork. So he must have got away with a full quart. Well, I must be going along, Rufus. You'll be all right. I'll speak to your father."

"Which one had the revolver, George or Tom?" inquired Rufus, in something of his crisp, professional manner.

"They both had revolvers in their pockets. I saw them myself."

"Yes, but there must have been an empty shell in one of them," insisted Rufus, almost impatiently.

"There were two empty shells in George's and three in Tom's," was the doctor's surprising announcement. "Shelby Wayne swears he remembers they got the pistols out a few weeks ago to shoot at a dog that had been pestering the sheep. That might account for some of the empty shells."

"Do you know what caliber they were?"

"See here, you can ask all these questions later on. I don't know much about pistols,—but, now that I think of it, I do remember Martin Connelly saying they were both thirty-twos."

"Well,—I won't delay you any longer, Doctor. I am terribly interested, that's all. You will come back soon?"

"Certainly."

The doctor departed hastily. Rufus sank back on the bed. He was in a cold perspiration, but a little smile played about his lips. There had been a moment when he was filled with a sudden appalling doubt. But it was all right now. The revolver with which he shot Bennie was a .32.

Arising abruptly he crossed over to the chair on which his garments were hanging. There was no active sense of guilt in the impulse which urged him to take certain precautions in his own behalf. He would have resented the implication that his act was in the slightest degree due to craftiness or to guile. Nevertheless, he glanced furtively over his shoulder at the closed door before taking up his

trousers to remove the revolver from the hip pocket. Then he quickly broke the weapon and extracted the single empty shell from the cylinder. Dropping the garment on the chair he darted over to the bureau.

From one of the little top drawers he took a box of cartridges. His fingers were clumsy as he stuck a fresh cartridge in the chamber,—he was never to forget that his hand shook so that he had to try twice before he could insert the point of the bullet in the evasive little hole,—and he was so afraid that he would drop the weapon to the floor in handling it that he rested his wrists on the edge of the bureau. Placing the revolver in the drawer he closed it quickly and again glanced over his shoulder. Now to dispose of the empty shell. This called for the utmost care. He was a trained, sharp-witted lawyer. He knew what it would mean if the shell were found and produced as evidence. For the moment, in view of his settled determination to acknowledge the shooting of Jaggard if it became necessary, he forgot that there was no real reason for him to hide the empty shell or to resort to any of the precautions he already had taken. He was instinctively, almost involuntarily, preparing a case for himself; he was, without actually thinking of it in that light, looking out for the interests of a guilty client. He did not think of himself as that guilty client. He thought only of himself as an honest, upright man,—and Rufus Playden was all of that.

He was standing near the bureau trying to decide how to make way with the shell when there came a knock at the door,—a loud, imperative knock, it seemed to him, and fraught with significance. As a matter of fact, it was the rapping of knuckles rendered timorous by the state of uneasiness which filled the mind of their owner. He stood as if frozen to the spot, glaring at the door for many seconds. Were they out there now,—after him? What the devil was he to do with the shell he held in his clenched hand? They would catch him with it if they came in——

"Are you asleep, Rufus?"

It was Mary's voice. His knees sagged a little when the tension was relieved.

"What do you want?" he called out, after a pause. His voice was steady.

"Dr. Higgs said for me to see what you wanted for breakfast. Are you all right, Rufey?"

Mary had been the Playden "hired girl" ever since he was a baby,—she came years before Mrs. Playden died,—and she had always called him Rufus or Rufey.

"I'm all right, Mary. But don't come in. I'm dressing. I'll be down to breakfast in ten minutes. Just fix me up a——"

"Oh, but you mustn't! Dr. Higgs said you was to stay in bed till he——"

"He makes me tired," broke in Rufus. "Make me a good, strong cup of coffee, Mary, and fry me a couple of eggs. I'll wait for him downstairs. But I won't wait long. I feel all right now. I am going down to the jail to see if there is anything I can do for George and Tom Wayne."

"Oh, ain't it dreadful, Rufus?"

"Terrible. Hurry along, Mary, please."

"But do you think you ought to be going down there now? You've had a bad spell and maybe——"

"Don't argue, Mary. My place is down there with them. They're depending on me. I am their lawyer."

Mary spoke from the top of the stairs. "Oh, Rufey, I do hope you and your father can get 'em off. I do hope——"

Rufus laughed harshly. "Never fear, Mary. We'll get them off if it's the last act of our lives."

He heard Mary go tramping down the stairs. After a moment he opened his hand. The shell lay revealed, but there was a small, deep, clearly defined red circle in the fleshy part of his palm.

His face lighted up suddenly. Darting over to the chair he fumbled in the pockets of his vest, producing a long,

scarcely used lead pencil. Over the blunt, round end of the pencil he jammed the shell and returned it to the pocket. The cartridge tip remained in plain view.

"The last place in the world anybody would ever think of looking for it," he mused. Then he straightened up, lifted his chin and murmured, half aloud, in a sort of exaltation: "And I can carry it forever and touch my lips with it whenever I like."

CHAPTER EIGHT

INNOCENT MEN ESCAPE

THE murder of Bennie Jaggard and the arrest of Barbara's brothers did not constitute a nine days' wonder so far as the people of Hurdleford and the county at large were concerned. Hurdleford would have stood aghast, but it would not have been surprised if the boys had shot young Jaggard regardless of the ugly revelations made by Eva Joslin. It should not be inferred, however, that this upright, God-fearing community condoned or defended the deed or that it recognized without abhorrence the spirit of revenge that led up to it. On the contrary, it saw no reason why the Waynes should punish Bennie for running away with Barbara when that perfectly sane and capable young woman, taking the bit in her teeth, had elected to run away with Bennie. They would have had no sympathy for the boys, indeed, they would have scored them unmercifully,—if they had so much as thrashed Bennie for the part he had taken in what could only be regarded by all fair-minded people as a joint transgression. If anything, said Hurdleford, Barbara was the stronger-minded of the two; it was not beyond belief that she might have done the persuading rather than the other way about. Still, knowing the Wayne pride and, by hearsay, the history of the Waynes as far back as those gallant days in the Southland when men fought duels over the slightest impertinence to their women,—or to other men's women, for that matter,—Hurdleford was not very much in doubt as to what would happen if Bennie Jaggard ever showed his face in town again.

The degree and character of castigation varied, that was all. Certain picturesque, romantic minds prophesied a duel;

the more prosaic looked for nothing more sanguinary than a horse-whipping; others, possessed of what is known as horse-sense, predicted a street brawl in which the supercilious brother-in-law of the Waynes would get at least one terrific "whaling," if not two.

But no one expected the Waynes to shoot Bennie Jaggard down in cold blood. That is, no one expected it and certainly no one desired it, up to the time it became known that he had wronged and deserted the confiding and beloved Barbara. Then there were scores of men,—decent, law-abiding citizens,—who openly declared that if she was *their* sister they'd blow Bennie Jaggard's brains out!

No one questioned the exactness of Eva Joslin's disclosures, no one for an instant doubted her veracity. She was not speculating or magnifying when she recounted the conversations she had overheard; not once but several times Bennie Jaggard had told his father that he did not marry Barbara, that she had expected him to do so, that he had cast her off, that she might be in the gutter for all he knew. (Or words to that effect.) She had heard old Absalom gloat over the ruination and disgrace of Shelby Wayne's daughter. On at least two occasions,—and she remembered that he laughed "something awful,"—the sick man was heard to say that the Waynes would have to stop talking about horse thieves now that they had a bad woman in their own family. (Eva admitted that he didn't say "bad woman." He used a single word that she could not bring herself to repeat, although it does appear in the Scriptures.) The connection between horse thieves and bad women puzzled her, to be sure, as it did every one else, but she credited Bennie with loudly and angrily reproaching his own father for calling Barbara such a thing. Still, explained Eva in her desire to be fair to old Absalom, if Barbara was one,—and accepting what Bennie said as true, she certainly *was* one,—why, that's what he had made her, wasn't it?

Accepting Eva's account as true,—it was slightly exag-

gerated by foul-minded local saints of both sexes,—there was an almost universal opinion among men that Bennie ought to be shot. As has been mentioned before, a great many expressed themselves as willing to do the job themselves under certain conditions. There were a number who said they would like to do it anyway, although not even remotely related to her by birth or marriage.

One of the very few who did not say he would like to shoot Bennie Jaggard was the man who actually did it.

The Wayne boys did not deny their guilt. They maintained an obstinate, perhaps mulish silence. For each believed in his soul that the other had slain Barbara's betrayer. There was not the slightest doubt in the mind of either that when they parted in the yard that night, the other had gone at once,—not treacherously but loyally,—to commit the deed he did not wish his brother to have on his soul.

It was all very clear to George and to Tom Wayne: Bennie Jaggard had been killed by his brother.

Believing this to be true, a denial by either would have been the same as accusing and betraying his own brother. So they held their tongues. They answered no questions put to them by the authorities, nor did they ask questions of each other. Not once in all the weeks and months that followed did George or Tom Wayne ask his brother if he had shot Bennie Jaggard. It would have been an unnecessary question; there could be but one answer. What was the use of asking the question that already had been satisfactorily answered up in the Jaggard lane? Why ask for details? Why, out of sheer curiosity, demand an account of that grim though simple tragedy? The deed was done. One of them had killed Bennie Jaggard. There was no secret about it, so far as either of them was concerned. True, each had been staggered by the discovery of his brother's breach of faith, but neither was long in overcoming the feelings of resentment and, in a sense, horror.

Without so much as a word passing between them, a tacit bargain was made. They would stand by one another; they would not accuse each other by protesting innocence. They knew precisely what had happened in the lane that night. It was not necessary to describe the scene. Tom, for instance, had confronted Bennie Jaggard. He had put a straight question to him and Bennie had given him a straight answer in reply. He may even have boasted of his conquest. There was only one thing left then for Tom to do,—and he had done it. He had simply and properly avenged Barbara. There was no other way for George to look at it. And, by the same process of reasoning, there was no other way for Tom to look at it. Either would have welcomed his brother's confidence and would have died rather than betray it, but, as it was not forthcoming, both were content to accept the other's silence as sacred.

And Shelby Wayne, understanding, asked no questions of his sons.

Without visible concern they received word of the coroner's verdict. They took it soberly, calmly; there was no evidence of bravado, no sign of defiance on the part of either. The coroner's jury found that Benjamin Jaggard had come to his death at the hands of George Wayne and Thomas Wayne, both being named. They were in the county jail at the time, awaiting action by the grand jury, then in session. When this body of men returned against them a joint indictment of murder in the first degree, evidence failing to determine which had fired the fatal shot, they accepted it without murmur, and when, in due course, their case was called in the Circuit Court,—less than a month after the commission of the crime,—they calmly pleaded "not guilty" and announced through their attorneys, Playden & Crouse, that they were ready for trial.

The world,—which in this instance was quite square and but little more than twenty miles from rim to rim,—smiled

knowingly, even tolerantly,—indeed, it would not be far amiss to say that it smirked,—and said:

“We all know that one of them killed Bennie, but which one? That’s the question. The evidence doesn’t show anything except the fact that they both wanted to do it,—and there you are. One of them is guilty, one of them is innocent. Which is which? The boys know and nobody else does. And if they continue to keep their mouths shut as they’re now doing, nobody else will ever know. There isn’t a jury on earth that would condemn the innocent one in order to punish the guilty one. The State hasn’t got a chance and (here it was the individual who spoke) I’m danged glad of it!”

The world at large, however, was not at all concerned about the case. Adjacent counties discussed the murder for a little while and then forgot about it. Remoter communities not too far removed from the scene perhaps knew there had been a murder somewhere in the state but that was all. Distant cities and lands never even heard of the assassination of Benjamin Jaggard. He was only one among thousands who are slain every year in the United States of America. What was a murder, more or less, to a people who could not scrape up the slightest interest in a crime of that character unless the perpetrator or the victim thereof was a member of the theatrical profession, a minister of the gospel, a beautiful young woman belonging to society (?), or sportive gentlemen of all ages who had been leading hitherto unblemished and therefore secret lives,—or anybody else qualified to make good and juicy copy for the jaded though virtuous readers in high and low places throughout the land? If Bennie had been shot to death by a chorus girl his name would have been on the lips of everybody in the country; his funeral would have been attended by newspaper reporters and photographers from far and near; his obituary would have appeared in ten thousand

journals under big, black headlines, not once but daily until something more delectable crowded it out; and the trial of the chorus girl would have made Mr. Benjamin Jaggard, deceased, so important that he would have had to live his life all over again for the benefit of society. But Bennie had been killed in a most commonplace, humdrum way by a person (or persons) unknown to fame or fashion, and so he and his slayers were doomed to almost complete obscuration.

So far as Hurdleford itself was concerned, justice already had been done. It believed that Bennie Jaggard had got just what was coming to him, to put it in plain but inelegant English, and while the Law was entitled to the right to consider itself violated there didn't seem to be much sense in putting the county to the expense of a trial that could end in but one way. Still, the Law is the law. It has to be satisfied. Just suppose it had been the other way about, for instance, and Bennie Jaggard had shot one of the Wayne boys!

A conscientious, perhaps vainglorious prosecuting attorney did all that he could to send George and Tom Wayne to the gallows. He knew, the judge knew, the jury knew and the people knew that one of them had killed Bennie Jaggard. A most extraordinary situation obtained. Notwithstanding the fact that the evidence against them was purely circumstantial, it was so convincing that the people actually feared that the boys might not be acquitted! The prosecutor had public opinion against him. He had the law with him, but what chance had the law in a case that might well have been entitled: *The State vs. The Executioners of Barbara Wayne's Betrayer?* It would have made no difference if the evidence had been positive; it wouldn't have mattered if a dozen witnesses came forward to testify that they saw one of the Wayne boys shoot Bennie Jaggard. The only thing that did matter was the testimony of Eva Joslin, who solemnly swore that she had heard Bennie say

to his father that he had deceived and abandoned the sister of the defendants and that Absalom Jaggard had laughed with glee. She was the only witness for the defense outside of numerous citizens of repute and consequence who testified to the good character and the standing of the Wayne boys in the community, and two farmhands who stated that to their certain knowledge the defendants had fired several times at a sheep-killing dog some weeks before.

The State had many witnesses,—most of them unwilling—all of whom grudgingly told of seeing the boys in a state of intoxication and who described their actions up to a certain point, but who were not permitted by the court to tell what they *thought*. Officials testified to the capture of the boys, to the finding of discharged revolvers in their possession and to their appearance and behavior when arrested. Mrs. Robbins, Dick Carr, Peterson and the Hinkle girl appeared as witnesses for the State. They couldn't tell anything but the truth, so far as they knew.

The defendants did not testify, nor did Shelby Wayne. The latter was permitted by the court to sit inside the enclosure at the same table with his sons and their counsel, a most unusual concession.

There was nothing in the manner or conduct of Shelby Wayne, however, that could have been construed as an appeal for sympathy on the part of a broken-hearted, pathetic parent. On the contrary, notwithstanding a quite proper air of concern and a genteel regard for decorum, he made no effort to conceal the fact that he was rather defiantly proud of his boys. He did not enter the courtroom with bowed head and troubled, anxious eyes, nor did he slump down in his chair in the attitude of one oppressed by misgivings. He was a picturesque figure, standing or sitting. His ruddy, smooth-shaven, deep-lined face was strikingly handsome. His iron-gray hair was so thick and wavy that it always had the appearance of being unbrushed. Dark brown eyes looked out from recesses roofed by shaggy,

rather fierce-looking brows of gray. They were seldom without a twinkle, however, though whether it was one of mirth or mockery no man knew or cared.

What if he did consider himself and his family to be a little, or even decidedly better than the rest of them? It did not matter to any one so long as he was gentleman enough not to go around talking about it. His neighbors were perfectly willing to admit that he had more reason to brag about his "people" than most of them had, but they would have been astonished had he done so.

Hurdleford was proud of him when it saw the way he strode into the courtroom, head erect, eyes akindle with what seemed to be a challenge, and took his seat beside his two sons, first bowing deeply to the judge on the bench,—who, by the way, involuntarily returned the smile and the bow. He also saluted the prosecuting attorney and his assistant, and all the people of Hurdleford who were unable to attend the trial (chiefly because they could not get into the courtroom) heard how the enemy got up and smiled and almost immediately sat down again and began thumbing notebooks and papers as if they had been caught doing something reprehensible, or at any rate, unprofessional. There were times during the trial when he leaned back in his chair, his thumbs in the armholes of his tan-colored waistcoat, his gray head cocked a little to one side, a faint smile on his lips as he gazed complacently at the struggling and, to him, pathetic prosecutor. It was almost as if he felt sorry for the poor chap!

But he never for an instant so far forgot himself as to convey to judge or jury by act or look that he wanted mercy for his sons or pity for himself. If he had had the impulse to lay a loving hand upon the shoulder of either of his sons, or to look wistfully into their eyes, or to utter a quiet word of cheer to them, he conquered it,—or perhaps it would be better to say that he did not surrender to it.

And Hurdleford liked the way he drove to the county seat each morning behind a span of high-stepping, beautifully kept mares, disdaining all automobiles, expensive or cheap. He held the reins himself. He held them high and tightly, and he sat very erect. Beside him on the seat of the light, diligently polished "side-bar" buggy rode black Ike Moses, the ancient darky who had come north with old George Wayne back in the seventies when Shelby, the grandson, was but little more than twenty-one, and who to this day served as hostler and stable boy on the place. Ike Moses was getting on to eighty years of age, but he was such a sprightly old man, so bright-eyed and alert despite his million wrinkles, that "stable boy" was by no means a misnomer. He slept in the barn. Before the Civil War he slept in a "slave house" on a Southern plantation. He was still happy, contented and loyal. It took more than a constitutional amendment to deprive Ike Moses of his right to be a slave. His duty on the humble but somehow haughty little farm of the Waynes was to take care of the horses. Over a period of nearly sixty years he had enjoyed a daily vacation,—sometimes he had it twice a day: it was when he sat beside a Wayne on the buggy seat behind a pair of spirited, thoroughbred trotters, their sleek coats shimmering like satin as the result of his own inconspicuous devotion to man and beast. He too despised automobiles. He hated the smell of them.

In front of the courthouse, Shelby Wayne would hand over the reins to Ike Moses, descend briskly to the curb, take off his gloves and lay them on the vacant seat, shake his legs a little to settle his trousers, and then march up to the scene of battle. Ike Moses, never forgetting to touch his hand to the straw hat that not only had descended from the heights of either George or Tom Wayne, but also continued its descent to the tips of his shriveled ears because of his neglect to stuff sufficient paper—if any—inside the

sweat band, would drive down to the nearest livery stable where he personally unharnessed, brushed and blanketed the beloved mares. When court adjourned for the day he was out in front, waiting to hand over the reins to Shelby Wayne. The latter half of his daily vacation began when his master took the reins.

Shelby Wayne was a gentlemanly tippler; he grew a mint bed of his own; he chewed "fine-cut" tobacco; he swore pleasantly and with unction; he was seldom if ever entirely out of debt; he would fight at the "drop of the hat"; he played poker with skill and honor; he bet on the races at the county fair; he was a Jefferson Davis democrat; and he was unnecessarily courteous to ladies regardless of their standing in the community. But to offset all of these undisputed shortcomings, he loved fine horses and almost any kind of a dog. There were a great many people who said he was a lazy, trifling, easy-going sort of man, and there were times when the sincerity of his effusions was subject to doubt, but if he had run for office in the strong Republican county where no Democrat had ever been elected he would have carried it by an overwhelming majority. And so it was that Hurdleford and all of its neighbors felt sorry for him now, although it was perfectly clear to everybody that he did not want anybody to feel sorry for him at all.

The trial lasted four days. All of the sessions found two young women sitting in the front row of seats reserved for spectators. They smiled encouragingly to the two young men on the other side the barrier, but at no time did they attempt to speak to them as they passed in and out of the courtroom. Every one came to know in time that these young women were the sweethearts of George and Tom Wayne, Kate Smith and Stella Davidson. Bailiffs saw to it that they always had the same chairs no matter how great the crowd or how disputatious the claims of earlier

arrivals. Beside them invariably sat the Rev. Joseph Davidson.

If all went well, said the gallant crowd, one of these girls would some day marry a murderer!

They had visited the county jail several times prior to the beginning of the trial. On these occasions they had conversed with their sweethearts through prison bars and they had renewed pledges made in less sinister places. And they had never ceased to wonder which of them was to become the wife of a murderer. But when the trial was once under way the boys refused to see them at the jail or to speak to them in the courtroom.

"They may decide to hang us, Kate," said George, lightly, on the occasion of the girl's last visit. "After they've done that, you can come every day and bring us flowers and cakes and make fools of yourselves and get into the newspapers as true and devoted sweethearts, but while this is going on I guess you girls had better act as if you belong to the general public and not to Tom and me."

"But, George dear, I want everybody to know that I am yours, that I belong to you now and forever," she protested. "And that's the way Stella feels about Tom. We both——"

"To be honest, Kate, I'd rather you didn't come near the courtroom while we're on trial," said he, earnestly. "You would only be exposing yourselves to the mob of hangers-on. They'd point you out and discuss you. They'd talk about how pretty you are and——" Here his manner turned whimsical: "No, dearest, I couldn't stand having a crowd of loafers staring at you every day and saying, 'She's a peach, isn't she? Both of them are. Those darned Wayne boys have all the luck, haven't they?'"

"I intend to be in the courtroom every day, George," said she defiantly.

"Well, I won't be in a position to order you out. But

I wish you'd look at it from a purely unselfish point of view. Give Tom and me a chance. We have a right to be noticed. If you girls stay away, we'll be the center of attraction. If you don't,—why, I doubt very much if even the jury will be aware of our presence."

"Don't be silly. Your own lawyer wants us to be there every day. Rufus Playden says he particularly wants Stella and me to hear every word of the evidence and the speeches, so that we may see for ourselves that neither one of you can possibly be guilty."

George shook his head slowly. "Good old Rufus! He hasn't a doubt in the world, has he? I guess he's the only one, however. And when it comes right down to facts, Kate, what the deuce does he know about it? He wasn't there, was he? But, here! I'm talking too much. The smart criminal is the one who keeps his mouth shut."

"You are *not* a criminal, George Wayne!"

He was silent for a moment, his hand resting on hers as it lay on the intersecting bar.

"I don't see how it is possible for me to love you more than I did before, Kate, but I do," he said, looking straight into her eyes. "It is wonderful to feel that you have faith in me. I don't mind what any one else thinks, just so *you* are sure, dear."

"I am sure, George," said she, simply.

The next day George Wayne, as usual, looked sadly at Stella Davidson from the far end of the corridor while she talked with his brother Tom. Poor girl!

Now, as to Rufus Playden, the real murderer of Bennie Jaggard.

He had made up his mind to go through with it. There was not the slightest trace of evidence against him, not even the remotest suspicion. He had found that out almost immediately after the arrest of Barbara's brothers. His interview with them just before they were taken off to the

county seat to jail was a trying one for him. How he managed to look them in the face and to shake their hands was more than he could understand, more than he could even believe. It had taken more hardihood than he thought he possessed. But he had managed to come through it without betraying himself, notwithstanding the affection that at times threatened to overwhelm him. He loved the Wayne boys. Then, as afterward, he wondered how he could have stood before them, looking into their bewildered but undaunted eyes, and yet hold back the cry that surged to his very lips. He alone knew that each one of them believed the other had done the shooting and, despite present or future denial, would continue to believe it. They were accusing each other even as he, the guilty man, clasped their hands and looked into their loyal eyes. . . . But he did get through with it.

Strange to say, he was not ashamed. He knew that nothing could possibly happen to them. Always he would be ready to come forward with the truth.

Nevertheless, he went down to the office that same night and wrote out a full confession. A staggering possibility had presented itself to him: his own sudden death. There was his heart! If that were to occur,—and no man knows when God may call him,—his lips would be sealed and two innocent men might go to the gallows for his crime. It was long past midnight when he closed the office and went home. The writing of the confession had taken but a few minutes of the hours he spent there in secret conference with himself as his own guilty client. But that was not all. How was he to get this document into the proper hands in the event that it was needed? The satisfactory answer came at last, after countless ideas had suggested themselves and been discarded. He trembled a little at his own daring. It was almost like swaggering recklessly in the presence of certain disaster.

Inserting the confession in a long blue envelope, he sealed it carefully and wrote on the outside in a firm, legible hand:

"My Last Will and Testament. To be opened only in case of my death.

"RUFUS PLAYDEN."

On second thought, he secured the flap in two places with wax and stamped the hot deposits with his notarial seal. Then he stuck it carelessly in the office safe. The next morning he brandished it, with a fine assumption of sheepishness, in the presence of his father and Mr. Crouse.

"See this? It's my will. Signed, witnessed and sealed. You will find it here in the safe, father, in case anything happens to me."

"My dear boy," said Judge Playden, startled; "whatever put it into your head to make your will?"

"Seems laughable, doesn't it? I haven't much to leave,—precious little, as you know,—but I wanted to be sure that certain people fall heir to certain of my earthly possessions. I got to thinking about it last night while I was working here. The Lord only knows when you or I or anybody else may check out. Look at Bennie Jaggard. He went out like a candle."

"Bless my soul! See here, Rufus, that awful thing has got on your nerves."

"No harm in being prepared, is there, father?" said Rufus, lightly. "And, by the way, it has just occurred to me that perhaps Bennie did not leave a will. He didn't have time to make one. By George, there's a complication, isn't it? Who are his heirs? Who will come into the Jaggard estate? So far as any one knows, there isn't a legal heir alive."

"Not one," said Judge Playden, solemnly.

"He hasn't a known relation," added Mr. Crouse, pursing his lips.

They were all thoughtful. Rufus at last broke the silence.

"I don't suppose Barbara Wayne could be a claimant as his common-law wife," he said, a curious huskiness in his voice.

"Such things have happened," said Judge Playden. "But I doubt whether she would come forward with a claim of that kind in view of the fact that one of her own brothers undoubtedly caused his death."

"In any case," began Rufus eagerly, "we ought to notify her. She——"

"My dear boy, we are lawyers. If her father chooses to inform her of the tragedy, all well and good. And if she desires us to act for her in the event she decides to—er—take the step you suggest, we will, of course, represent her, just as we are to represent her brothers now. Otherwise, we can do nothing. It is not our place. It is a family affair. If I know anything about the Waynes, they would all burn in hell before they'd lay claim to a penny of the Jaggard estate."

"A strange situation," said Mr. Crouse. "A family completely wiped out of existence, so far as we know. It seems incredible."

"Aye," said the Judge, picking up the sealed envelope Rufus had tossed on the desk and scanning the grim instructions. "Aye," he repeated after a moment; "a family wiped out. A great fortune going begging. Queer anomaly, isn't it?"

"Oh, some distant relative in the South will turn up," said Rufus. "Dozens of them, perhaps. Like mushrooms. Old Benjamin Jaggard must have had cousins or something of the sort."

"He told me once that he did not know of a living relative outside of his own son and grandson," said the Judge. "That was when I drew up his will. He remembered his mother saying time and again that his father had no

brothers or sisters and that her two sisters, younger than herself, had died when they were children."

"Bennie Jaggard may have left a will," suggested Mr. Crouse.

"Possibly,—but I doubt it. Few young men are as forehanded as you, my son," said Judge Playden, rather drily. "'To be opened only in case of my death,'" he read. "Well, I hope you are looking a long way ahead. In any case, you have taken particular pains to prevent any of us from discovering the extent of your fortune. Possess your soul in peace. Your secret is safe. Shall I put this envelope in your own private drawer?"

"It doesn't matter, sir," replied Rufus, with a gesture of indifference that belied the sudden alarm occasioned by those startling words "your secret is safe." He affected an apologetic grin. "Just stick it in the safe anywhere." Then, on inspiration: "It was a foolish thing to do, sealing it up like that. Let me have it, please. I'll break it open and read it to you."

"On no account," said his father, as he placed the envelope in an open pigeon-hole. "That would be disobeying instructions. We'll leave it for some future generation to break." He smiled. "They are always breaking wills, you know."

Several days went by. Rufus's conscience was troubled, but not for reasons apparent to the readers of this narrative. As expected, Playden & Crouse had been retained as counsel by the Wayne boys. A comparatively small fee had been agreed upon. Rufus Playden was confronted by a grotesquely simple yet stupendous condition. He, as a member of the firm, would be forced to accept pay for defending the men who were being tried for the crime he had committed. It was unthinkable. Not only were they paying the penalty that should be imposed upon him, but they were actually paying him to plead for them before a court of justice.

"What is troubling you, Rufus?" his father inquired one day. "What's on your mind? Not this case, I hope. It is going to be quite simple. There is nothing to worry about. We're sure to get them off."

"Easy as rolling off a log," declared Mr. Crouse.

Rufus planted himself in front of the two older men, who were on the point of leaving the office for the day. His eyes were bright and feverish. Somehow his nose appeared to be more prominent than ever before; there was a pinched, drawn look about the nostrils; his thin, keen face seemed to have shrunk in the last few days, thrusting his nose into greater relief.

"I would like to talk something over with you," he began. He knew they would be dumbfounded. "Can you spare me a few minutes?"

"Certainly. What is it, Rufus?"

"Well, father, I've been thinking,—thinking a lot. I know you and Mr. Crouse will think I'm crazy, but—here it is. I don't believe we ought to accept a cent from Mr. Wayne and the boys."

Judge Playden stared. His partner blinked as he fixed his squinting eyes on the young man, as if he was not sure that he had heard aright.

"What did you say, Rufus?" demanded the former.

"We've been friends all of our lives," hurried on the young man. "The best and closest of friends. They're in trouble now. If we needed Shelby Wayne or either of the boys to stand by us in case of trouble,—any one of us,—they'd do it without an instant's hesitation. They would spurn compensation. They would fight for us,—as friends,—and you know they would. They're that kind of men. Well, they're up against it now. I simply can't bear the thought of taking money from them. That—that's what has been on my mind, Father. Let's stand by them as friends, not as men who have to be paid for doing them a good turn. I mean it. I am terribly in earnest. I know

you can't look at it as I do, or as father might for that matter, Mr. Crouse,—you see, you are not as close to them as we are,—but let's see if we can't come to some agreement between us to——”

“My dear boy,” broke in his father, laying his hand on Rufus's shoulder; “I can appreciate just how you feel. I feel the same way,—and I may add, so does Mr. Crouse. I am willing to give my services and so is he, and we would do our best. But you overlook one thing,—a very important thing. It is an insurmountable obstacle. I refer to the Wayne pride. Do you suppose for an instant that they would accept *charity*?”

“But, hang it all, sir, it isn't charity!” cried Rufus.

“It comes to the same thing. They are friends now, my boy, but if we even suggested to them the thing you propose, we would then and there transform them into bitter enemies.”

“They would take the case out of our hands and employ some one else,” said Crouse. “And I wouldn't blame them, Rufus. It would be an insufferable insult to them.”

Rufus groaned. “I—I guess you are right. They wouldn't accept,—they wouldn't understand.”

“We will have to take their money,” said his father. “I don't like it any more than you do. But there is no alternative. It is only a thousand dollars. Shelby Wayne named the figure himself after Mr. Crouse and I had suggested five hundred. Even then he knew that we were trying to be—well, to be generous. You see how it is?”

“Yes, sir,—I understand,” muttered Rufus. “It can't be done. We will have to take their money. But,” with flashing eyes, “I will see that they get it back some day,—every penny of it.”

“Good for you, Rufus,” said Mr. Crouse, warmly. Then, as if the thought suddenly occurred to him: “You might put 'em in your will. Ha-ha-ha! That's the trick. They can't take offense at anything you do after you're dead.

Ha-ha-ha! Come along, Judge. Let's step over to the Hoffman House."

The case was rushed to trial. Neither side played for delay. The jury,—perfunctory questions such as those bearing on previously formed opinions and the infliction of capital punishment were put to the talesmen and answered without any particular effect on selection,—listened to the evidence, the arguments of counsel and the judge's charge and then, as if subtly admonished to stick to the principle of rush, returned a verdict of not guilty in less than twenty minutes after going out.

No one connected with that court or with the county bar had ever listened to a more earnest, impassioned plea than that made by young Rufus Playden in behalf of his clients. He confined himself almost entirely to a single point; the retribution that had justly fallen upon Benjamin Jaggard for the wrong he had done to the beloved sister of the defendants.

And yet when George and Tom Wayne walked out of the courtroom free men there was but one person in all the excited, joyous crowd who did not believe them—or one of them, at least,—to be guilty, despite the verdict. That person remained seated at a table near the jury box, as if overcome by a queer exhaustion, his eyes fixed on the papers with which he fumbled unseeingly, and to himself he was saying:

"They can never be tried for it again,—they can never be tried for it again."

People were congratulating the stalwart Waynes; others were shaking hands with the jurors; women were chattering shrilly; two extremely pretty girls, their faces radiant, their eyes swimming in tears, clung to the arms of the discharged prisoners; Judge Playden and Samuel Crouse, over near the door, had their arms around the shoulders of Shelby Wayne; the judge, descending from the bench, paused on his way to chambers to converse with eager spectators whom he

ought to have fined for contempt of court when the verdict was announced, but didn't; a little old negro, carrying a pair of driving-gloves in one of his quivering hands, his hat and a buggy-whip in the other, manfully withstood the jostling and shoving of the crowd and shouted over and over again: "Right dis way, Mistah Shelby,—right dis way, suh."

But the man at the table neither saw nor heard any of these things. Suddenly he arose and faced the empty jury-box. For a moment only he stood there. No one was near. He was quite alone. He lowered his head ever so slightly and murmured to an invisible jury:

"Guilty."

His back was to the departing throng as, unseen by any eye, he took from an inner pocket a long blue envelope with jagged red splotches on the flap and slowly tore it into small pieces.

BOOK TWO

CHAPTER ONE

BENJAMIN THE THIRD

TO-MORROW! There is no such thing as to-morrow. It is always to-day. To-morrow is always coming. To-day is the thing we have in our hand, yesterday is that which we have cast away, to-morrow is what we are reaching out to grasp. And when we have it in our hand—lo, it is to-day. To-morrow is hope, to-morrow is vision. We live for it and it never comes. In the wink of an eye we have relinquished to-day and what is it that we have in its place? To-morrow? No. To-day. We drop something in the long path we have traversed, we pick it up eagerly, only to find that it is still what it was yesterday: To-day. To-morrow is just as far off as it was yesterday.

The days were all to-morrows for Barbara Jaggard, waiting anxiously, sometimes bitterly and always impatiently for word of Bennie. No day went by that she did not say to herself: "To-morrow will bring a letter or a telegram from him." But as each to-morrow became to-day and no to-day brought the message she was longing for, she began to count her yesterdays and, with forlorn, perplexed eyes, saw them pile up into weeks and fortnights.

Two weeks of September, all of October and a few days of November were in that heap of ugly yesterdays before she gave over saying to herself that the letter would come to-morrow. Instead of that she was crying out in the terror of suspense that only women can know: "Almost any day now, almost any day!" She was thinking of herself now and of death.

At first she had not minded. She had been content to let the days go by without word from him, for that was

part of their agreement. It was she who had laid down the law, it was she who had pointed out the perils of letter-writing. A single envelope, she argued, addressed to "Mrs. Benjamin Jaggard" would be enough to ruin everything. She knew the post-office in Hurdleford. She knew that it had no secrets. A letter addressed to Mrs. Benjamin Jaggard might just as well be delivered to all of the inhabitants of Hurdleford: it would travel as fast, if not faster, by word of mouth than it would by the swiftest railway train and, to quote Barbara, before you could say Jack Robinson, Absalom Jaggard would be wanting to know who Bennie *was* married to if it wasn't that damned Wayne girl?

But as time went on and no letter came, her eyes grew dark and fretful and sometimes they smoldered with a sullen, secret wrath. When these fits were upon her she stormed in the privacy of her hot little room or railed audibly as she walked through secluded lanes in the usually successful effort to compose herself through sheer fatigue. Much as she loved Bennie, she was wont to mutter harsh, unkind things about him,—for which she was always ashamed and self-despised.

Her own common-sense told her that the reproaches she heaped upon the seemingly heartless and neglectful Bennie and the fault she found with him were unfair, horrid, unreasonable. She described herself as cantankerous,—a hateful word,—and sought an apology for her irritability in the physical wretchedness she was experiencing in these days.

Of course, she would argue, poor Bennie was not to blame. He too was having a hard time of it. Old Absalom was fooling them all. He was being stubborn about dying. Just like him, she complained,—vindictive old buzzard! And as for Dr. Higgs,—well, she'd never trust a doctor again. Two weeks! Shows how much those wise-looking old fools know about it, anyhow. Here was old Absalom clinging like grim death to the little life he had left in him and— Why, there had been no need for Bennie to go West for weeks! They

got him out there under false pretenses, scared him into going when there wasn't the slightest prospect of his father dying for months. Two weeks, indeed!

Then, in the midst of these harsh reflections, she suddenly would give way to abject remorse, almost groveling before her own innate sense of justice.

She even felt sorry for the dying Absalom; she was actually glad that Bennie's return had constituted a source of consolation for him in his last terrible days. But then, she would counter fiercely, no doubt it was Bennie's presence, and nothing else, that prolonged his life;—he who had been ready and perhaps eager to die had found something to live for and was making a fight for it. So she rambled. Why, he might be getting better! He might even recover and go on living for years! That would be like him! To get well just for spite! All the more reason for him to get well if he believed that Bennie was not married to her,—ah, *that* would be something worth living for! She could almost hear old Absalom Jaggard's joyous chortle as it grew stronger and louder day by day; she could almost see him, first sitting up in bed, then in a chair, then walking about the room a bit, and then,—God, what a horrible joke on both of them!—strutting around the town as husky as anybody, growing fat and puffy and oily on the laughter he was getting out of it.

But no,—Bennie would not allow anything so grotesque as that to happen. She could trust him to set old Absalom straight if needs be. All he would have to do if it came to a pinch would be to confess that he had lied in the beginning and walk out of the house, no better off than when he went into it,—disinherited, unregenerated but loyal to her.

And that is precisely what he would do, she decided, not without a trace of malice. Bennie loved her; he would do anything for her; he would die for her. She came first with him,—always first,—just as he came first with her. The situation was perfectly clear to her,—that is to say, it

was clear to her when it wasn't obscured by thunderclouds of angry disappointment and self-pity. She understood,—perfectly. Sick old people seldom if ever died when they were expected to. Bennie was simply sitting there, poor boy, waiting for the end to come,—and it was a long time in coming.

She remembered her own grandmother's last illness. Even as a little girl she realized that "granny" was fooling everybody, including the doctor. The doctor,—yes, that same stupid Dr. Higgs,—had said that she was likely to die "any day now"; he had said it every day for weeks and weeks, and what happened? Granny (she worshiped her Granny Wayne) lived for nearly three months after Dr. Higgs first began to say she couldn't last more than a day or two. She would never forget hearing her father, Granny's own son, say to a neighbor,—and there were tears streaming down his cheeks when he said it (it was only an hour or so after Granny passed away),—that it was cruel the way she had "hung on." Hung on! Barbara hated the expression. As she grew up she heard other people utter it, sympathetically, kindly, even solemnly, when sufferers were "hanging on" instead of dying. And that is just what Bennie's father was doing now. He was "hanging on."

She had come to the little village in the Connecticut hills before the middle of September. Her baby was expected early in November. At the time of her arrival the boarding-house on one of the back streets was not more than half full of guests. They were middle-aged or elderly persons who stoutly declared that there was no time of the year in the lower Berkshires as glorious as the fall of the year, and they ought to know, if anybody knew, because they had spent the fall of the year in this very village ever since they could remember,—and that was a long time in nearly every case.

One old gentleman, it appears, had once spent the fall of the year in Europe and he was authority for the statement—

undenied and unquestioned—that the fall of the year over there couldn't hold a candle to the fall of the year over here. Everybody agreed with him. Which goes to show what sort of people Barbara had fallen in with when she went to the boarding-house to live and to wait.

They were kind and gracious and very well satisfied with everything on earth except the table, and, as may be imagined, they had never been far beyond the middle of New England. And they were interested in Barbara. They endeavored at once to make her feel at home among them. They were old enough in years for that. Moreover, they were interested in her for reasons other than those of mere sociability. They speculated. Some said two months, others said three, and before she had been there a week she had received sage and comforting advice from various middle-aged and venerable ladies, all of whom had different ideas on the subject but who were agreed that there wasn't anything at all for a fine, strong, young woman to worry about. She was very much embarrassed by these kindly attentions, but was grateful, just the same. She was lonely and sometimes miserable. And they helped her with her sewing besides.

In no time at all every one in the village was talking about that beautiful young woman down at Mrs. Hope's boarding-house. Her fellow-boarders and the townspeople with whom she came in contact smiled when she said she was from New York City.

"You haven't lived there long, have you?" inquired one of her new acquaintances at supper on the evening of her first day among them. She had been placed at a table with four other people, a brisk little old gentleman (retired) from Springfield, his somewhat brisker little old wife, and two spinsters from Hartford.

"A little over a year," she replied.

The brisk little old lady seemed awfully nice and jolly and friendly and motherly. So did the brisk little old gentle-

man, for that matter. At any rate, he never made the slightest effort to appear fatherly.

"I thought so," said the former, almost chidingly.

"Plain as the nose on your face," said her husband, beaming.

"You couldn't hire me to be a New Yorker," said Miss Frisbee, with a complimentary grimace.

"I hate 'em," said Miss Dobie.

"I was born out West," said Barbara, smiling.

"I was sure of it," said the brisk little old lady.

"Dear me!" sighed the brisk little old gentleman, very politely. It was his way of letting Barbara see that he knew she couldn't help it. "I know very little about the West," he confessed.

"A great many years ago," began Miss Frisbee, pedantically, "the commonwealth of Connecticut extended almost if not quite as far west as the Mississippi River. You would scarcely believe that the northern part of Ohio and Indiana were once a part and parcel of our beloved little state, would you? What is known as the Western Reserve once belonged to—Oh, Susan, I wish you would go and tell the cook at once that I simply cannot endure string beans that haven't been strung. Take these away. My goodness gracious, I don't know how many times I've had to speak about——"

"The butter isn't fresh, either," broke in Miss Dobie. "It wasn't fresh yesterday or the day before. I spoke to Mrs. Hope about it and she promised——"

"What part of the West?" inquired the brisk little old lady.

"Southern Indiana," replied Barbara. On second thought she added, mendaciously: "In one of the suburbs of Hurdleford."

"You don't say so," exclaimed the brisk little old gentleman, much as if she had mentioned one of the best known suburbs of London.

"Your accent is quite southern," said his wife. "I shouldn't have thought you were born in the north."

"She said South Indiana," said Miss Dobie, rather severely.

"Indiana is a northern state," explained Barbara. "My people were southerners, however. They came from Kentucky."

"Really?" cried the brisk little old gentleman, who was now on familiar ground, having heard, admired and hummed the song "My Old Kentucky Home." "You don't really say so!"

"Indiana is situated on the Wabash River," announced Miss Frisbee, evidently a woman of learning. She was pecking gingerly at the beans Susan had neglected to take back to the cook as ordered.

"Do you expect to remain with us long?" inquired the brisk little old lady.

"My plans are a little indefinite," said Barbara, color stealing into her cheeks. "A month or so, perhaps."

"Are you married?" asked the brisk little old gentleman, most courteously. Then gallantly: "I trust not, my dear young lady."

Barbara blushed and her eyes fell; Miss Frisbee coughed and instantly said something about beans being perfectly atrocious unless they were strung; Miss Dobie patted her lips with her napkin four times in rapid succession before modestly assuring Miss Frisbee that "Yes, the butter *is* strung,—I mean strong"; the little old lady gave her husband a "look."

"Of course she is. Haven't you heard all of us speak to her as Missus Jaggard? And I should like to know what you mean by saying, 'I trust not.'"

"Ah," said he brightly, "I wouldn't have said it if I had dreamed she was married."

"You'd better keep still," said his wife, fixing him with a hard eye.

"I am sure you will enjoy it here, Mrs. Jaggard," said Miss Frisbee. "It is wonderful in the fall of the year. The trees, you know, turn red and yellow and golden, and the——"

"How do you like your room?" inquired Miss Dobie. "I had it early this summer and didn't like it at all. Too stuffy. I do hope you won't be too stuffy in it. If you——"

"Thank you," interrupted Barbara, pleasantly; "I like it very much." Then whimsically, and perhaps just a trifle wickedly: "I'll promise not to be stuffy, Miss Dover."

"Dobie."

"Of course. How stupid of me."

"I want to ask you, Mrs. Jaggard, if you've ever tasted better biscuits than these," said the little old gentleman, enthusiastically. "The cook is famous for them. And her waffles in the morning are wonderful. Melt in your mouth. We have them twice a week,—Wednesdays and Sundays. Excuse me,—what did you say your husband's business is?"

"I didn't say that he had *any* business," said Barbara.

"How?"

"My husband is not engaged in business."

"Bless my soul! You're not married to a man old enough to retire from business, are you? Why, I retired only last year and I'm seventy-one. You——"

"He is an artist."

The brisk little old gentleman's mouth remained open for a few seconds, revealing a portion of one of the cook's celebrated biscuits. He was disgusted but not more so than the somewhat finicky Barbara.

"What did you say his name was?" he asked, after swallowing.

"The same as mine," sweetly. "Jaggard."

"Can't say that I ever heard of him. But that's nothing against him. I'm not very well posted on art."

"I get awfully tired of rice pudding," remarked Miss Dobie, mincingly. "It's so wet."

"And he isn't old?" inquired the old gentleman.

"He is twenty-four, sir."

"When I was twenty-four I was working twelve hours a day in a dry-goods store," announced the old gentleman, almost accusatively. "And now I own it, lock, stock and barrel."

"How wonderful," exclaimed Barbara, evincing great interest.

"Yes, and I was married before I was twenty-three," rather sternly.

"Ah, you haven't anything on my husband there," cried Barbara. "He was only twenty-three when we were married. And just think how long it will be before he is seventy-one and in a position to look back nearly fifty years to the time when he was young and strong and ambitious and married to me for only a little over a year. There is a great advantage in being old, isn't there? You can always look back to the days when you were young,—and just married to a very pretty young girl." As she uttered the last ironic sentence she nodded her head and smiled very sweetly upon the brisk little old lady.

The brisk little old gentleman cackled uproariously, the two spinsters giggled and the lady who was supposed to be complimented sniffed.

"I am his third wife, my dear," she announced drily. "He was twice twenty-three when he married me."

"And, what's more," boasted the brisk little old gentleman, changing the subject abruptly, "I don't owe a dollar in the world."

"He's a mighty thrifty man," said his wife, merrily.

"You'll make the young lady think I am stingy," protested he.

"My dear Andrew," said she, pinching his ear, "you've

been so thrifty all your life that you've still got all the wild oats the good Lord gave you to sow when you were a boy,—every last one of them. I am only joking, Mrs. Jaggard," she explained, her eyes twinkling. "I like to tease him. And, what's more, *he* likes it."

"Would you like to go out and sit on the front porch for a while, Mrs. Jaggard?" inquired Miss Frisbee, sticking her rolled-up napkin into the celluloid ring. "It's very warm indoors."

"Thank you,—I think I shall go up to my room. I still have some unpacking to do."

"I'll come up with you and help you," said Miss Dobie, kindly but firmly. And she did.

In this manner Barbara's stay in Mrs. Hope's boarding-house was inaugurated. These people and others at the outset exhibited the friendliest interest and concern; they were amiable and in most cases affable. The women, being much older than she, sort of mothered her, so to speak,—that is to say, they went out of their way to perform little services that she was perfectly able to manage without their aid or guidance.

But as time went on they proved to be more human than humane. They began to wonder, to speculate. Where was this young husband of hers? Why was it she never had a letter or a telegram or a telephone message from him? Snoopers soon discovered that she never received letters of any kind.

Barbara realized too late that she and Bennie had erred in not adopting an assumed name for her. If they had only thought of that, she might have been receiving letters from him frequently without danger of exposure at either end. What fools they had been not to have thought of it! At any rate, Bennie should have thought of it, she fumed. He had placed her in a most awkward, embarrassing position,—yes, a most unenviable position,—simply because he had not

had enough sense to insist that she be known here by some other name rather than her own. An absolutely innocent subterfuge it would have been in the circumstances.

It wasn't as if they were unmarried. Even if it were discovered that her name was Jaggard and not Smith or Brown there couldn't be anything wrong about it, because she *was* his wife. She laughed scornfully when she thought of the pains he would have taken with his name if she were not his wife. Men never use their own names when they go to hotels with women who are not their wives,—but they always take good care to provide them with decent names, even though they know they are not entitled to them and in most cases do not deserve them. But here was a case where craft was paramount and he had permitted his conscience, or whatever you want to call it, to subject her to suspicion because she was actually using her own name.

She sensed the change in the manner of her fellow-lodgers. They continued to be polite but she could not help seeing that they were beginning to look askance,—and she did not blame them. The wedding ring on her finger was not enough. A husband usually goes with a wedding ring—and where was hers? She knew what they suspected or, at any rate, what they feared. She would have been suspicious herself of a girl in similar circumstances.

The position became unbearable. Her pride revolted. These people were thinking of her as a bad woman; they were saying to each other, behind her back, that she was not married, that she had come to this sequestered, out-of-the-way little town to hide until everything was over and she could go back to her life of sin—or to a life of remorse.

As her time approached and no word came from Bennie, she wanted to slink off into some dark place where no one could find her, where no cold, accusing eye, could reach her, and there wait for the justification that was bound to come. There were times, too, when she longed,—indeed, she had

great difficulty in controlling the impulse, being proud and hot-headed,—when she longed to stand out before these honest wonderers and cry:

"I *am* married, damn you all! I am not what you think I am. I am as good as any of you. Yes, I am *better* than any of you, because I am a Wayne, and what, in God's name, are you? See this? It's a telegram. I'm sending it to my husband, the best man in all this world. He's 'way out West. On business,—important business. But he will come to me in plenty of time. He will come on the fastest train when he gets this telegram. You'll see. He's only waiting for word from me. Yes, you'll see what kind of a man *I've* got for a husband. You'll see."

She did write two or three letters to him but never posted them. That would be breaking the compact that she herself had counseled.

Then, one day in the first week of November, the storm broke. Mrs. Hope, the landlady, came to her room, closed the door behind her, and said:

"Don't get up, Mrs. Jaggard. I'll sit here on the bed. I've come in to have a little talk with you."

Barbara was sitting in an armchair near the radiator. It was a cold, raw day. A fall wind was shrieking around the corners of the house. She was instantly on the defensive.

"I am paid up in full, Mrs. Hope. I don't owe you a penny. That is, except for the week we are now—"

"Oh, I didn't come to talk about that," said the landlady, sitting stiff and uncomfortable on the edge of the bed. She was a lean, angular woman, and she tried to smile as she added: "You've been good pay. I've never had to wait a day for your check. Just the same, I've got to ask you to give up your room."

There was a short silence. Barbara straightened up and looked squarely into Mrs. Hope's eyes. She betrayed no surprise, no confusion, no dismay. Instead her dark eyes

were so cold and her gaze so disconcertingly level that Mrs. Hope, somehow, quailed.

"Very well, Mrs. Hope. I shall get out to-day. If you will make up your bill and have it——"

"Oh, I couldn't think of asking you to go to-day. It is nearly dark now. To-morrow or next day will be quite——"

"I was going next week anyhow, as you are aware, Mrs. Hope," interrupted Barbara. "My husband was to come for me. He is to be with me at the hospital. I think I told you he was in the far West on important business. He was not to come until I sent for him. I shall do that from the hospital,—after I have seen the doctor again and got something definite. I prefer to go this evening. If you will be good enough to ask Ella to come up and help me pack, and telephone for an automobile to take me over to the hospital, I will be very grateful to you. I will telephone at once to the hospital to say that I am on the way over."

"Oh, I—I don't mean for you to go like this, Mrs. Jaggard. I—I——"

"But you want me to go, just the same."

"Well, there are not many people here now, Mrs. Jaggard, as you know. Only eight or ten people. They are planning to stay on till after Thanksgiving. Old customers. They come every year and I—I can't afford to offend them. They——"

"You needn't say anything more about it, Mrs. Hope. I quite understand," said Barbara, curtly.

"I might just as well be honest with you," said the other, bridling a little. "They don't like the looks of things. Neither do I, for that matter. You are an unusually pretty girl. I'm not saying you've got into trouble,—girls do sometimes, you know,—and I'm not——"

Barbara burst into a fit of hysterical—and, to Mrs. Hope, shameless—laughter.

"I don't see anything to laugh at, young lady," she cried hotly.

"You—you don't know how funny you are," exclaimed Barbara, weakly.

"Oh, you think it's funny, do you? You think I'm funny, do you?" exploded Mrs. Hope. "Well, I'll show you how funny I am. You'll get out of this house to-day,—right away. I don't believe you've got a husband. Not one of your own, I mean. The chances are you've got some other woman's husband. And he's footing the bills for you. Wait a minute! I'm not the only one around here that thinks so, either. Goodness knows how much damage I've done to the reputation of my house by having you here,—in the condition you're in and all that. Several people left two weeks ago on your account and Miss Frisbee and Miss Dobie left last week. They said they had their own reputations to think of, and if you stayed on—— Why, for two cents I'd telephone to the hospital and tell 'em not to take you in, Miss. If I was to——"

Barbara arose. Her eyes were flashing fire.

"You do that, Mrs. Hope, and I'll sue you for every dollar you've got or ever will have," she flared. "And there isn't the slightest doubt about my winning the case, either. Now listen to me. You *have* been good to me, you *have* been kind and thoughtful. For that I am grateful. I suppose I ought not to blame you for suspecting that things are not as they should be. But, even so, you have no right to speak to me as you have without knowing what you are talking about,—and you don't, that's all. I'll tell you this much, Mrs. Hope. I came up here to be in the country while my husband is away,—up here where it is clean and cool and quiet. I came up here to have my baby in case I did not have to go back to New York or join Mr. Jaggard in the West before that time came. That's all that need be said on the subject, Mrs. Hope. I am just as honest a woman as you are, just as respectable, and—and all that,—and if my husband and my father hear of the things you people have been saying about me, they'll——"

"Now please be calm, Mrs. Jaggard," implored Mrs. Hope, uneasily. She was impressed by Barbara's manner if not by her words. "Don't fly off the handle, my dear. Not seeing your husband around I—I thought maybe you were a widow. You see, we all——"

"Well, I am *not* a widow," interrupted Barbara coldly.

How little she knew as she uttered the rather defiant retort that she was now and had been a widow for over a month.

Suddenly Mrs. Hope's eyes narrowed. She leaned forward, fixing the girl with a shrewd and at the same time startled look.

"See here, it's struck me that maybe the reason why your husband can't come to you and can't write is because he's a criminal fleeing from justice. For that matter, he may be in jail somewhere, or Sing Sing. It's mighty funny that he'd leave you here all by yourself, among strangers, at a time like this, unless there was some good reason."

Barbara's fine red upper lip,—strangely white all of a sudden,—was lifted very much like that of a dog's when he snarls.

"That is enough, Madam. Get out of this room. First you insinuate that I am a prostitute, now you say that my man is a jailbird. You get out! I will be getting out myself as quick as I can, never fear. Please! Get out!"

"Oho! You're getting high-and-mighty, eh? Ordering me out of my own room, are you? Well,—— Here! What are you doing?"

Barbara had grabbed up a small water pitcher from the table at the head of her bed.

"If you don't get out of here instantly, I'll smash this pitcher over your head!" she cried, furiously.

"Goo-good gracious! You must be crazy," cried the landlady, fear in her eyes as she backed toward the door.

"Almost!" screamed Barbara. "Yes, I'm darned near crazy!"

Mrs. Hope fumbled for the knob, her wide eyes fixed on the contorted face of her lodger. She got the door open and was darting out into the hall when Barbara called to her.

"Just a second! Send Ella up here to help me. The quicker the better, madam. And you needn't bother about telephoning. I will do it myself. I'll be out of here in an hour."

The door closed with a bang. She stood for a long time glaring at it. Then she sat down limply on the edge of the bed, her knees giving way. She was horribly dizzy. Everything was going around before her eyes. A knock at the door some time afterward roused her. She stood up, swaying, her hand to her throat.

"So this is what you've got me into, Bennie Jaggard. You've made me an object of scorn and shame and—— Come in, Ella!"

Before undertaking anything else, she sat down and wrote a telegram to Bennie, which she intended to send to him as soon as she left the house, no matter what the consequences might be. Then she set to work helping Ella.

It was nearly an hour later, when the packing of her trunk and bag was completed, her bill paid, the automobile ordered and assurance received from the hospital that she would find a room ready on her arrival, that Barbara collapsed. She was just starting to dress for the ride to the town when she toppled over in a dead faint, sinking to the floor before the terrified maid could catch her.

There was great excitement. Mrs. Hope, now thoroughly frightened and anxious, hastily called the local doctor, imploring him to "fix her up" so that she could be got out of the house before "anything happened." She didn't want the girl to die on her hands or anything like that, bringing disgrace upon the house, getting into the newspapers, stirring up all sorts of scandalous rumors, and just simply putting her (Mrs. Hope) in a terrible predicament because she

didn't know who the girl's people were or how to get in touch with them and,— Well, "for goodness sake, fix her up, doctor, and get her over to the hospital as soon as she's able. Yes,—I'll pay for an ambulance if they will send one over for her. I'll pay gladly."

The doctor reassured Mrs. Hope. He announced that Mrs. Jaggard would be perfectly able to make the trip by motor in an hour or so, and that he would accompany her.

"She's had a shock of some kind," said he. "Has she received bad news, Mrs. Hope—or anything of the kind?"

"Not that I know of," replied Mrs. Hope. "I will say she's been terribly out of sorts to-day,—in an awful humor. Flies up about everything. Jumps right down your throat if you try to reason with her or——"

"If I were you I would send a telegram to her husband to come up at once. We'll get her to the hospital in plenty of time, but,—you see, she assured me that it wouldn't be before the middle of November and I'm afraid she's——"

"Telegraph her husband?" snorted Mrs. Hope. "I don't know where he is. She says he's out West somewhere. Didn't you hear me say I don't know who her people are or where to reach them?"

They were out in the hall, some distance from Barbara's door. She was sitting up in the rocking-chair when the doctor stepped outside to consult with the landlady. Her cheeks were gray and her eyes were wide and pleading, but she was quite herself once more. She was eager to be on her way to the hospital,—a friendly shelter, though she was not likely to find herself among friends even there.

"I noticed a telegram lying on the table, Mrs. Hope," mentioned the doctor. "I suppose it was to her husband. But, of course, I am not sure."

"No, I guess you ain't sure," sniffed Mrs. Hope significantly. "Nobody is."

The doctor cleared his throat. "As a matter of fact, I made a copy of it, just as a precaution in case of—er—

emergency." He took a detached prescription blank from his pocket and announced: "It is to Benjamin Jaggard, care of Absalom Jaggard, Hurdleford, Indiana, and this is what it says: 'Come at once. Nothing to be alarmed about but urgent that you should be with me next week. Cannot understand your silence. How is your father? Have just come to the hospital in this town as arranged. Wire me here. Much love and devotion from your lonely Barbara.'"

Mrs. Hope looked worried. "My goodness, it seems as if she's really got a husband, doesn't it?"

"What do you mean? Has there been any question about it, Mrs. Hope?"

"Oh, there's been a little talk,—that's all. But if she's sending a telegram to Benjamin Jaggard, why, that certainly shows she's been using her own name and it also shows that there is a Benjamin Jaggard out there in the wild west. But, see here,—maybe it's a trick to fool us, doctor. Seems funny she'd leave a telegram lying open on the table where me or Ella or anybody else could——"

"The first thing she asked me when she came to, Mrs. Hope, was whether the telegraph office over there would be open to-night. She wanted to be sure she could get a night letter off to her husband this evening so that he would receive it in the morning. People do not think of tricks, as you call it, the instant they come out of a fainting spell. I never heard such tommy-rot. Of course, she's got a husband. Your own common sense ought to tell you,—just as mine tells me,—that she is the kind of girl that *would* have a husband. Confound it, madam, you've only to look into her eyes to know that she isn't the kind of girl that—er—— Certainly she's married. She just simply couldn't be anything else." He hesitated a moment and then blurted out: "She's got too damned much sense."

The doctor,—a youngish man, you may be sure,—did not know how Barbara had racked her tired, throbbing brain in composing the telegram so that Bennie would not

be betrayed in case it fell into old Absalom's hands. She struggled for many minutes over what seemed on its face to be a simple, straightforward message; when it was completed she read it through and smiled bitterly, even sardonically, over what she had written. To herself she was saying: "There's nothing in it to contradict Bennie if he has told the old man I am not his wife. In fact, if Mr. Jaggard reads between the lines he can draw but one conclusion,—that I am in trouble and Bennie is responsible. Oh, Lord! I wish I'd never suggested the thing to Bennie. I wish I'd let well enough alone. He would be with me now and I'd be as happy as a lark,—God, how happy I'd be!"

She reached the hospital a little before eight o'clock that evening, and was immediately put to bed. She was suffering, she was terribly afraid. All the way over in the automobile she was in agony, and yet she insisted on being taken first to the telegraph office, where the doctor himself got out and filed the message to Bennie. Later on, she made a point of asking the doctor in charge of the hospital what his fee would be, including everything, and drew a deep breath of relief when he mentioned a figure well within her means. She had been keeping close track of her finances. Nearly six hundred dollars still remained to her credit in the New York bank.

Her baby was born the next morning, November the third, a fine boy. He was named long before he came: Benjamin Jaggard, the Third. She did not suspect that when he came into the world he would be the only one of the Jaggards alive, that he was to be the first of a new line with the living blood of a dead man coursing through his veins.

CHAPTER TWO

WORD FROM A LOST SOUL

PLAYDEN & CROUSE, at the end of a certain period, went before the Superior Court in Radley and, as attorneys for Benjamin Jaggard (the young man had not lived long enough to dismiss them), asked the judge to authorize a search of the decedent's apartment in New York City in the hope that a will might be discovered. No such document had been found among his scanty effects at the house on the hill. While in all likelihood he had not made a will, nevertheless it was possible that one existed; in any case, papers of administration ought not to be issued until every effort had been made to find it.

Word had been received from the police in New York City, in response to a letter from Playden & Crouse, to the effect that the apartment occupied by the young man was closed and the whereabouts of the tenant unknown. His belongings were still there; the rent had been paid in advance up to the first of November, and the owners had received no intimation that he intended to give up the apartment-studio on which he had a lease that did not expire until the following October. They reported that he had been living there with a young woman who was reported to be his wife, but that she had disappeared without leaving any trace behind. The apartment could not be searched without an order of court.

Armed with the proper authority, a firm of lawyers in Manhattan, acting as agents for Playden & Crouse, were empowered to enter and search the studio. This was within a fortnight after Bennie's death. They found nothing in the shape of a will, nor was there any evidence that he possessed a lock-box in a safety deposit vault. In a long

report to Playden & Crouse they stated that the young artist had been living there for several months with a young woman, and that while she had vanished, there still remained in the flat numerous articles of a distinctly feminine character. They went on to say that the studio and living-rooms had been carefully and perhaps deliberately stripped of all intimate personal effects, such as papers, photographs and so forth. No inquiries or investigations would be made, however, unless definite instructions were received from Playden & Crouse.

And so it came to pass that only a day or two before Bennie Jaggard's posthumous son was born, Playden & Crouse advised the court of their inability to produce a will and asked that an administrator of the estate be appointed and that he be directed to advertise for heirs and claimants to said estate, there being no present means of ascertaining their whereabouts, relationship or rights. The last will and testament of Absalom Jaggard had been filed for probate and all of its provisions were in process of being carried out.

On top of this action, and before the court was ready to appoint an administrator to the huge estate, came the telegram from Barbara to Bennie. The telegraph operator first called up Mrs. Robbins, who still remained in charge of the house on the hill, and she directed him to deliver the message to Playden & Crouse, the family lawyers, who, she supposed, were the only persons legally empowered to receive communications intended for their late client. She flatly refused to allow the operator to read the telegram to her, declaring in great agitation that she wouldn't for the world listen to a message intended for a dead person. She didn't believe in spiritualism but if this wasn't supernatural, she'd like to know what it was,—a communication coming like this to a man who had been in his grave for more than a month.

"But this is from somebody who doesn't know he's dead," protested the operator, who was so thrilled himself that he

hated to let slip such a rare opportunity as this to discuss the most tremendous bit of news that had come over the wire in a "coon's age." Officially his lips were sealed, but unofficially he could open his ears to all that the astonished Mrs. Robbins had to say on the subject. Playden & Crouse, he knew, would merely instruct him to deliver the message in the usual way and they would attend to it. And that would be the end of the matter so far as he was concerned.

"You do what I tell you. Take it to Judge Playden. Good-by."

Barbara's message was delivered by hand to Judge Playden shortly after he arrived at his office accompanied by Rufus. To say that it created a sensation,—an unpleasant sensation, in fact,—would be merely to state an obvious fact.

"What are we to do about it?" said the Judge, rumpling his gray hair with spread-eagled fingers,—a habit he had when perplexed. "She doesn't know Bennie is dead, Rufus,—hasn't heard a word about it. She's in trouble. That's perfectly clear. And she's begging Bennie to come to her. By gad, it certainly looks as though he promised to stand by her when the time came. There's no doubt in my mind what has happened, Rufus. He promised to stand by her, but instead of behaving like a man he sneaked off and left her to fight it out alone."

"You dirty cur!" almost snarled Rufus, his face white, his hands clenched. He sat down heavily in a chair. "You ought to be shot!"

His father stared at him. "He has been shot, Rufus. What ails you?"

Rufus passed his hand over his eyes, clearing away the curious fog into which he seemed suddenly to have plunged. "Of—of course. What a crazy thing to say. I guess my—I guess my mind must have jumped clear back to—to a month ago, when he was still alive,—damn him. Why, I—I actually saw him just as plain as anything, standing

here in the office as he did that day when you read his father's will to him." He wiped his dripping forehead. "Lord, it—it was queer."

"You're still unstrung and nervous over the trial, Rufus. You took it so terribly in earnest. See here, my boy, you've simply got to go away for a couple of weeks and——"

"Yes, what are we to do about it?" broke in Rufus as if he had not heard a word his father was saying. "Something's got to be done, father,—and at once. She's in a hospital. She may be dying. Let me see that telegram. Where was it sent from? That's our only clew to her whereabouts. Ah, here it is. Yes, Bennie Jaggard must have known she was going there. She takes it for granted he knows where she is. Well, somebody must go to her at once. This very day."

He sprang to his feet and pulled out his watch. His face was quivering, his eyes were wide and eager.

"Now, now, Rufus! Pull yourself together. Just think for a moment. Use your head."

"Use my head?" almost shouted his son. "At a time like this? Not much! Now is the time for me to use my heart,—and that's what I'm using. It's time somebody used a heart in Barbara Wayne's behalf. Listen to me, father. I am going to her. Everybody else in the world has gone back on her,—poor girl,—but I'm everlastingly damned if I'll go back on her. She's down and out, hurt, smashed, and she's asking for help. She's wondering, she's hoping, maybe she's crying her eyes out. She's probably all alone up in that God-forsaken Connecticut town,—— Why, I——"

"I repeat,—use your head," interrupted his father. "This is not our affair. It is Shelby Wayne's affair, my boy. We have no right to presume, we have no right to act without consulting him."

Just then Samuel Crouse came in. Rufus shot a warning, pleading look at his father and finding that it was of no

avail, strode quickly to the window and stood there, looking down into the windy street, his shoulders hunched.

"Here is a telegram to Bennie Jaggard from Barbara Wayne, Sam," said Judge Playden promptly. "Read it."

Crouse, before removing his overcoat or hat, read and then carefully reread the night letter.

"By thunder, Judge, she doesn't know he's dead," said he, squinting his eyes. "She doesn't know he's been murdered by one of her own brothers."

"Probably it wasn't even mentioned in the eastern newspapers," remarked the Judge. "I thought perhaps her father might have got in touch with her in some way. But it seems not."

"We must turn this telegram over to Shelby Wayne," said Crouse. "It's out of our hands, of course. Good Lord, I hope he'll not give her the cold shoulder now. After all, she's his daughter."

Rufus whirled. "Yes, but she's asking Bennie Jaggard to come to her, not any of her own people," he cried out. "Hang it all, if she wanted her father she would have telegraphed to him instead of Bennie, wouldn't she? Why, she'd die before she'd ask her father for help or consolation or— or anything."

"Nevertheless, Shelby Wayne has got to know about this," said his father firmly. "And right away. You spoke of going to her yourself, Rufus. Why the devil should you go? She's got a father and two brothers, hasn't she? It's their place to look after her, now that they've very properly gotten rid of Bennie. He wronged her and they made him pay. They——"

"Just a moment, Judge," broke in his partner. "It has just occurred to me that perhaps Barbara didn't want anybody to kill Bennie. I gather from this telegram that she's going to have a baby. She doesn't say so, but—well, she wouldn't be likely to appeal to Bennie unless it was something like that, would she? If we take Bennie's word for

it, she wasn't married to him, but just the same he's undoubtedly the father of this child that's coming. How are we to know that she isn't still expecting him to marry her? And, by thunder, for all we know, that is exactly what he may have intended to do if he could have induced his father to help him out financially—and, say, as a matter of fact, we don't know all that took place between father and son anyhow. Eva Joslin didn't hear everything, you know. This telegram sounds to me as if Barbara had been expecting some sort of word from him. Else why does she say 'cannot understand your silence'? And why does she say she has gone to the hospital 'as arranged'? Would she wind up with 'much love and devotion' if she had it in for Bennie? There's something decidedly queer about this, Judge."

"Let me read it again, Sam."

The senior members of the firm were undeniably puzzled. Rufus took no part in the discussion that followed. He had seated himself at his father's desk; his chin was in his hands, his brilliant eyes darting from one speaker to the other.

"It seems to me," said Crouse, finally, "that it would be a terrible shock to her if one of her brothers were to go to her now, Judge, in the light of what has happened. He would have to tell her that they had been arrested, tried and acquitted of the murder of her lover,—of the father of her unborn child, in fact. He would——"

"Confound it!" broke in Rufus, striking the desk top with his clenched fist. "You are assuming that she is going to have a baby. How the devil do you know that——"

"A woman doesn't go to a hospital according to an arrangement made at least two months beforehand unless she's going to have something more than typhoid fever or a sudden attack of influenza. In any case, she's ill. I still feel it would be wrong to let one of her brothers go to her and break the news and all that."

"You're right, Sam," said Judge Playden. "If Shelby

Wayne should refuse to go himself, it would be madness for George or Tom to go in his place, even though they love and still cherish her. But some one has to go, just the same. It's only right and decent. But it must not be one of the men suspected of killing Bennie Jaggard. We'll talk it over with Shelby Wayne. If he decides not to go and wants some one else to represent him, why, it might just as well be you as anybody, Rufus. We'll see. It's a ticklish situation,—a very ticklish one—and it will require thought and tact and cleverness."

"Wayne, even though he refuses to have anything to do with her personally, will undoubtedly desire to make some provision for her. He is her father and he'll take care of her in some way," said Crouse. "But, you may be sure of one thing. He will not allow her to come back to Hurdleford after the way she has disgraced him and her family. On the other hand, supposing he forgives her for everything, he can't bring her back here to live, you know. Especially with a baby."

"She wouldn't come," said Rufus.

"Call up Shelby Wayne, Rufus, and tell him to come to the office at once," said Judge Playden. "Don't mention Barbara. Just simply say it's important."

"As if Barbara isn't important," began Rufus resentfully, and then turned abruptly to the telephone. The color was returning to his drawn cheeks; the queer, tormented glitter that had been in his eyes,—as of one in pain,—slowly disappeared. He wet his dry lips with his tongue, and it too seemed dry, sabulous.

Half an hour later Shelby Wayne sauntered into the office. His face, which had become strangely gaunt in the last month, was quite ruddy. A sharp November wind, full of frost, had scorched it with its chill fire as he drove rapidly into town, Ike Moses, hunched up and shivering, on the seat beside him. The old darky was now driving the spirited team up and down Center Street, remembering each time

he passed the windows of the law office to straighten his ancient back, cock his head manfully, tauten the reins as any one ought to do who held them over the backs of Wayne thoroughbreds, and squint piercingly out of the corners of his eyes at the windows above.

"Good morning, gentlemen," said Shelby Wayne, advancing to the old sheet-iron stove in which coals were crackling. (The "Smith Block—1871" did not have steam radiators.) "A snappy morning. As my son Tom would say, good football weather."

"Good cider weather, Shelby," amended Judge Playden. "Rufus, pull a chair up to the stove for Mr. Wayne. Sit down, Shelby. Better take off your overcoat."

Wayne shot an anxious, inquiring look at the two senior members of the firm. He remained standing.

"I received your message just as I was starting to drive to Radley. The boys didn't come home till after twelve last night. You're not going to tell me that they've"—he coughed—"that one of them has confessed to you in private."

The Judge smiled. "No—no, indeed, Shelby."

"It's been on my mind," said Wayne, taking a deep breath. Then he nervously began to unbutton his coat.

"I rather guess they were spending the evening listening to the confessions of—ahem—Kate Smith and Stella Davidson," remarked the Judge dryly.

Wayne shook his head. "Tom tells me that Mr. Davidson, in spite of all he did for the boys and in spite of the fact that he is very fond of my son,—well, the long and short of it is, Stella's father says he can't allow his daughter to marry a man who may have the blood of another on his hands."

There was a long silence. Wayne threw his overcoat over the top of the desk and held his gloved hands out to the stove. Some of the red had faded from his cheeks.

"I reckon he's right," he went on slowly. "He's a man

of the Gospel. He's a preacher. It wouldn't be natural for him to want his girl to marry a—a—I suppose there's only one word for it—a murderer."

"But there is nothing, absolutely nothing, to show that Tom is a murderer, Shelby. What right has Joseph Davidson to assume that Tom——"

Wayne held up his hand. "I reckon, Judge, it's pretty certain that one of my boys shot Bennie Jaggard. The jury found both of them not guilty, and the verdict pleased everybody, even Mr. Davidson,—but all the same, gentlemen, I guess there isn't a soul in this county that doesn't believe one of them did it. It would be better if the one who did it came out and said so, for the sake of the other, but, bless their hearts, they'd die first. That's the kind of boys they are. It's pretty rough on Tom, though. He's very much in love with Stella. It hurts. But, by gad, gentlemen, he'll take his medicine, even if he isn't the one who did the shooting."

Rufus Playden leaned forward, gripping the edge of the desk with rigid fingers.

"Do you mean to say that Tom is going to lose Stella because of—because of this thing?" he asked, a strange huskiness in his voice.

Wayne hesitated. He set his jaw before replying. "My daughter defied her father and married a man I objected to, Rufus. Stella may do the same thing. I guess it all depends on whether she cares more for Tom than she does for her father."

"The cases are hardly parallel," remarked Judge Playden. "There was a feud between the Waynes and Jaggards. Mr. Davidson is very fond of Tom. So is Mrs. Davidson. The cases are not at all——"

"Do you happen to know whether Kate Smith's people feel the same way about her marrying George?" broke in Rufus.

"George has offered to release her," replied the father of the Wayne boys.

"And—and what does she say to that, Mr. Wayne?"

"I don't know. George has done his part, that's all I can say. Kate will have to decide. He has been fair and square with her." He turned and faced the others, who were standing. "You see, gentlemen, if you give a woman a chance to think,—and she is entitled to that chance,—she is more than likely to decide that it would be mighty unpleasant to go on wondering all the rest of her life whether her children's father is a murderer or not."

"But supposing George were to swear on his soul that he did not do the shooting," said Rufus, fumbling nervously with the lead pencil he had taken from his pocket,—the pencil with the cartridge shell tip. "Wouldn't that convince her?"

"It would convince her of just one thing," said Shelby Wayne, coldly. "It would be the same as telling her that Tom did it,—and I guess you can trust George not to do that. But, gentlemen," he went on, more affably, "you asked me to come to see you as soon as possible. What is on your minds?"

Judge Playden drew up a chair and sat down facing the visitor.

"See here, Shelby, I want to talk to you about—it's a tender subject with you, I realize,—about Barbara. Have you ever heard from her?"

Wayne stiffened. "You are right, sir. It is a tender subject. I don't care to discuss it at all. You know how I feel about it."

"Nevertheless," began the other firmly, "you've simply got to discuss it, whether you want to or not."

"What are you driving at, Judge Playden? And what do you mean by saying I've got to talk about it?"

"Keep your temper, Shelby. I have a reason for asking you whether you've heard from her."

The other started. "Have you had word from her?"

"I will answer that question when you have answered mine."

Barbara's father regarded the Judge fixedly for a moment or two.

"We are very set in our ways, we Waynes, Judge Playden. I swore I'd never speak of her again. But since there must be a good and friendly reason for asking about her, sir, I will say that I have had but one letter from her since she went away over a year and a half ago. She wrote me a letter the day after she left home, asking me to forgive her if possible. She said she was married to young Jaggard and I believed her. I am glad now that I did not weaken and forgive her. She lied. She wasn't married to him at all. You've no idea how it hurts me to have to talk about it, gentlemen."

"I understand, Shelby,—perfectly. And you have never heard from her since?"

"No, sir, I have not. I don't know where she is. I don't want to know."

"She is your daughter, Shelby Wayne. If she were in great trouble, would you go to her, would you help her?"

Wayne was silent, staring past the judge. Rufus, watching him intently, seemed not to be breathing.

"She is in trouble," said Mr. Crouse, after a moment.

"You've heard from her, then?"

"Yes," said the Judge. "That is to say,—we've heard indirectly. I have opened a telegram that came from her to Bennie Jaggard this morning. It was brought to us as his lawyers."

"What's this? Why, good God, man, doesn't she know he's dead?" cried Wayne, starting up from his chair.

"Evidently not. I will read it to you, Shelby."

After reading it aloud, Judge Playden offered the despatch to Barbara's father, who made no move to accept it. His face was scarlet.

"She asks him to come to her, as arranged," he said thickly and with a mighty effort at self-control. "She doesn't ask me. She doesn't ask any of us Waynes. She asks a dirty, sneaking Jaggard. It's him she wants, not any of her own people. I don't think I need say anything more, gentlemen. You did right in consulting me, however. Good day, gentlemen."

He picked up his overcoat and was on his way to the door when Rufus sprang forward to confront him.

"Wait a second, Mr. Wayne. She's in trouble. She needs you, sir. Surely you can't——"

Wayne stopped him with a gesture. "If she needed me, Rufus, she would have telegraphed to me and not to the blackguard who made a—a damned strumpet of her."

"But would you go to her, sir, if she were to ask you to come,—you, personally? She doesn't know he is dead. She's at her wit's end. Good Lord, sir, to whom should she turn if not to the man she trusted and——"

"You seem to forget, sir, that she is a Wayne. She forgot her pride when she—when she went away,—but, by gad, I'll say this much for her. She'd be too proud now to come begging to me for anything. I've got one thing to be thankful for, gentlemen. She's still a Wayne. She's never been a Jaggard, not even by marriage. It's a hard thing for a father to say, but by gad, sirs, I believe down in my soul that when the time came she was too proud to marry a Jaggard. She ran off with one and became his—his,—well, you know,—but it was not in her to sink low enough to become his wife."

His hearers were stunned. They stared aghast, unbelieving, at this extraordinary father who could find it in his

heart to utter such things as these. Judge Playden was the first to recover.

"Bless my soul, Shelby!" he exclaimed. "You don't know what you are saying."

"I don't, eh? I've said it over and over again to myself for the past six weeks, Aleck." His hand was on the door-knob. "I am her father. I will see to it that she does not suffer want or privation. You may answer that telegram, Judge, and you may say that you have talked with me. Tell her I love her and that I will come to her if she asks me to come, but not until then. But make it clear to her that if her pride will not allow her to do such a thing, I am still ready and willing to give her pecuniary aid, not only for the present but so long as I shall live."

"As you wish, Shelby," said Judge Playden, a slight tremor in his voice.

"Whatever I do for her will have to be done through you as agents, Judge Playden. You understand that?"

"But in the event she does ask you to come to her? In case she begs you to take her back?"

"I will go to her, Judge Playden. But I will never bring her back to Hurdleford."

"She'll never ask you to come, Mr. Wayne," cried Rufus, hotly. "And she'll never take a penny from you in the way of charity. You know that as well as I do, sir."

"Thank you, Rufus, for saying that," said Wayne simply. "You know her mighty well, I see."

"But she's in trouble," began the young man earnestly.

"Stop! I gather from this telegram what sort of trouble she's in. I want to say to you all, here and now, that I don't want ever to lay eyes on this bastard child of a Jaggard. She'll have to keep it out of my sight if I do conclude to go to her. Make that clear to her when you write. If either of my sons decide to go to their sister, I shall not attempt to restrain them. They love her. I guess you know how much, gentlemen."

"We thought it best not to speak to them about this matter at present," said Judge Playden.

Shelby Wayne pondered this. "Perhaps you are right, Judge," he said at last. "I see what's in your mind. Yes, I guess perhaps you are right. I shall not speak to them about this telegram."

"But we can't leave her to face this thing all alone," began Rufus, almost fiercely.

"My dear boy," said Barbara's father; "you seem to forget that she sent for Benjamin Jaggard. You gentlemen were his lawyers. You received and opened a telegram intended for your client. It is up to you, I should say, to deal with his affairs in any way you see fit."

"We are also your lawyers, Shelby," said Crouse, who had not spoken for many minutes.

"I am not likely to forget that, Sam."

"Are we to represent you in this matter?"

"Yes. Go as far as you like. I direct you to go to this town in Connecticut and consult with Barbara, but only on one condition: as *my* lawyers and not as Jaggard's. I will defray all expenses and I will abide by any arrangement you succeed in making,—if you succeed at all. That is all I have to say at present, gentlemen. Good day to you."

He passed out of the room. Through the closed door they heard him heavily descending the stairs. With one accord they went to the windows and waited for him to emerge from the entrance below. He was buttoning his coat as he came forth and looked up and down the street in quest of Ike Moses. They saw him hold up his hand as a signal to the invisible driver, and a few seconds later the skittish mares clattered briskly into view, drawing up at the curb with Ike Moses sitting up as straight as a ramrod. Shelby Wayne mounted to the seat and took the reins from the hands of the darky, who had slid over to his left. Then, as Ike Moses sagged down into his shabby overcoat and lost all of his painfully sustained pride of bearing, his mas-

ter squared his shoulders, tilted his head a little to one side, and drove off with a flourish.

The three men walked slowly back to the stove. The room was not cold, yet they huddled about the fire as if the heat were comforting.

Presently Rufus spoke. "We ought to answer her telegram, father."

"I've been considering that very thing. We must not send a message that will be a shock to her. It's a terrible situation."

"Shall we answer it as Shelby Wayne's representatives or as Jaggard's?" said Mr. Crouse, frowning dubiously.

Rufus suddenly straightened up, the light of decision in his eye.

"I am going to her," he announced, firmly. "To-day. I'll catch the New York train in Chicago this afternoon and be with her to-morrow some time. Telegraph her that Benjamin Jaggard is unable to leave at present but that some one from our office is coming by the first train to represent him and,—yes, I am sure it is the right thing to do,—and her father."

Judge Playden regarded his son narrowly for a moment before speaking.

"You believe that to be the wisest thing to do, Rufus?"

"There seems to be nothing else to do, father."

"I mean,—for you to go?"

"Why not? I was her friend, I still am her friend."

"You considered yourself more than her friend at one time, Rufus,—and not so long ago. Men don't get over it that quickly."

His son bit his lip. "Yes, that is true. I did. But that's past and gone. She needs something more than a lawyer now, sir. She needs a friend. I am going, sir."

The Judge flushed. His eyes glittered. "I can offer no objection to your going as a friend, Rufus, but if you——" He stopped short.

"Go on, sir."

"I'd rather not," said the Judge curtly.

Rufus uttered a short, rasping laugh.

"You needn't hesitate, father. You believe I am still in love with Barbara Wayne?"

"Are you?" demanded his father, bluntly.

"I shall never love any other woman," replied Rufus evasively.

"By that you mean you will never marry any other woman?"

"I would be a fool to say that, sir."

Judge Playden leaned forward, bending his long body so that his face was quite close to his son's.

"Even the wisest of men do quixotic things, my boy. If you have it in mind to ask this girl to marry you, I can only say that I would sooner see you dead than married to Bennie Jaggard's leavings. I guess we understand each other now, Rufus. I can't prevent your going to her and I shall not attempt to do so. But you know how I feel about it."

Rufus drew a long breath.

"You need have no uneasiness on that score, sir. Bennie Jaggard in his grave is as much of an obstacle as he was when he was alive." With this rather cryptic remark, he drew another long breath and then calmly suggested that, as the time was short, a plan of action should be discussed and settled upon as speedily as possible. He glanced at the office clock. They had a little over three hours to spare before the train left for Chicago.

Just as he was leaving the office for the railway station a few minutes before train time, a second telegram addressed to Benjamin Jaggard was delivered to Playden & Crouse. It was from the hospital authorities and laconically informed the dead father that a fine boy was born that morning and that mother and child were doing well. The older lawyers pursed their lips and nodded their heads; they had not

failed to notice the apparently intentional omission of the word "wife."

As for Rufus, he betrayed no visible sign of agitation or even concern. They could not know, however, that his blood seemed to have turned to ice in his veins and for the briefest spell he could have sworn that it was not flowing.

His instructions were clear and simple; he agreed to them in every particular. First of all, he was acting for Shelby Wayne, conveying to the unfortunate Barbara her father's offer to provide her with a reasonable allowance on which to live but only in case she was willing to ask him for it and was without the means to support herself and child. Moreover, Rufus was authorized to say that her father himself would come to her if she would only say the word. He was to ascertain if young Jaggard had taken out life insurance policies, where he banked or had a safety box and whether he had made any definite provisions for Barbara before leaving her. But all this was as nothing to the duty he had to perform before any of these subjects could be broached.

He would have to tell Barbara that Bennie Jaggard undoubtedly had been slain in cold blood by one of her brothers.

CHAPTER THREE

RUFUS EATS GRIDDLE-CAKES

BENJAMIN JAGGARD THE THIRD was three days old when Rufus Playden, the man who slew his father, first looked upon his ugly, wrinkled face. He was a fine, lusty infant and other people assured Rufus that he was handsome. God save the word, thought he. He could hardly believe his eyes. Barbara was so beautiful and Bennie, much as he had disliked him, was after all a good-looking man.

"I should say it *is* a beautiful baby," said the nurse. "You ought to see some of the freaks we get around here. This baby is a perfect Venus compared to——"

"A Venus?" gasped Rufus. "Isn't it a boy?"

"Sure it's a boy. You didn't think it was a girl, did you?"

"Ahem! Thank you very much. Awfully kind of you to let me see him. You say the—ah—mother is getting along nicely?"

"Wonderfully. You could see her right now if the doctor gave permission. She's been expecting some one from home to—— Did I hear you telling the superintendent that you're a lawyer?"

"I am a lawyer. An old friend of the family besides."

"Do you know this kid's father?"

"We were brought up together in the same town."

"Well, if you'll excuse me for saying so, he ought to be here. She's been asking for him all along. What's the matter? Have they been divorced, or what?"

"I beg your pardon. I wasn't listening. You were saying?" Rufus had heard the question. He pricked up his ears. The woman had asked: "Have they been divorced?" That could mean but one thing: the hospital authorities looked upon Barbara as a wife.

"Maybe I've got a nerve to be asking personal and private questions, but I like her and I can't help thinking she's been getting the worst of it from her husband. I suppose he's left her, or else he wouldn't be sending his lawyer up here to see her."

He thought quickly. "All I can say, Miss, is that they are not living together at present."

"Well, if he mistreated her or deceived her or anything like that, he ought to be shot," said the nurse, warmly. "And you can tell him I said so when you see him," she added, as she whisked herself away, carrying with her the box of roses he had purchased for Barbara at the florist's hard by. All the way up from New York city he had guiltily but obstinately thought about flowers for her.

He was now waiting in the private office for his first interview with Dr. Fryberg, the head of the hospital. His plan of action, formulated some time before, underwent a most satisfying revision in view of the timely discovery that he would not have to discuss Barbara from any other angle than that of a wife. He had decided, of course, to tell the doctor that Benjamin Jaggard was dead,—indeed, he had made up his mind to announce that he had been murdered. It would, of course, be necessary to go into details,—there could be no excuse for him to withhold such obviously interesting facts as the arrest and acquittal of the two brothers,—but in the light of what he had just learned it would be most unwise to tell the whole truth to this unsuspecting doctor.

The nurse had given him a lead. Yes, he would explain, Jaggard had left his wife. Her father and brothers naturally were very bitter. There had been threats of killing. Suspicion fell upon the two brothers, but they were honorably acquitted for want of sufficient evidence. He would even admit that public opinion and belief laid the crime at the door of one or both of these young men. He had a very ticklish, unpleasant job ahead of him, he would lament,

this breaking the news to the sick woman that her husband had been killed and that her own brothers were accused. But he would take no step, however, without the doctor's advice and permission. As a matter of fact, he would be willing, if advisable, to withhold the grewsome news until she was practically recovered.

Dr. Fryberg came in presently and was deeply distressed, not to say horrified, by the facts reported by the young lawyer.

"This is most tragic, Mr. Playden,—most tragic," he broke in at one period. "I suspected that something was wrong between this young woman and her husband, but this—why, this is frightful. I really don't know how she will take it. I am sure she was extremely fond of Mr. Jaggard, no matter what their differences may have been."

"Of course,—of course," said Rufus, moistening his lips. "No doubt she was. But, my dear sir, he—that is to say, it seems to be quite certain that he abandoned her and returned to his father's home, leaving her to get along as best she could."

"I know nothing about that, Mr. Playden. Everything seemed to be all right between them seven or eight weeks ago. He came here to make arrangements for his wife's admission to the hospital."

"He came to see you?" demanded Rufus, sharply.

"Yes. I thought he was an extremely agreeable and—er—devoted young man. There was nothing to indicate that——"

"When was this, may I ask?"

"I can give you the date if it is important. He was alone. Afterwards she came over twice to consult me. But go on with the story, sir."

Rufus was staggered. He succeeded, however, in concealing his surprise and went on with his story. Upon its conclusion, the doctor inquired:

"Am I then to understand, Mr. Playden, that you are

here as the legal representative of Mrs. Jaggard's late husband?"

"In this instance, doctor, I represent her father, Mr. Shelby Wayne, of my town."

The doctor knit his brows. "It is none of my business, but as I am very much interested in Mrs. Jaggard's case, perhaps you wouldn't mind telling me whether you are here for the purpose of inducing her to take some sort of action in regard to her husband's estate,—assuming that he left an estate, of course."

"First of all, it is my disagreeable duty to inform her of his tragic death. After that, I may discuss her—ahem—claims. You see, sir, my firm, Playden & Crouse, have always acted for both the Jaggard and the Wayne families."

"Then you are in a position to know whether a divorce has ever been granted."

"There was no divorce," replied Rufus.

"Merely a—er—what you might call an estrangement?"

"I suppose so."

"Well," said the doctor, arising; "she is in no condition just now to receive the dreadful news you bring, Mr. Playden. I doubt whether it would be safe to tell her for many days. You may see her in a day or two. She is expecting some one from your office. I suppose you have come prepared with some satisfactory story to tell her, explaining her husband's inability to come himself. It might be well for you to say at first that you are here, not as a lawyer but as a friend who happens to be in the east at this time on other business. In the meantime, let me assure you that she is in excellent condition and having the best of treatment and care. You may telegraph her father that all is well with her. I gather that he is ill?"

"Ill? Oh,—er—yes. He is quite an old man, doctor. Somewhat broken."

"I see," said the other, eyeing the young man shrewdly.

Then as he held out his hand to Rufus, he unwittingly dropped his bombshell. "We are taking good care of such personal effects as she brought along with her. She turned over to us, and I have them in the safe, a few pieces of jewelry, several hundred dollars in money, and her marriage certificate. Good afternoon, Mr. Playden. If you will drop around to-morrow morning——"

"Did you say her—her marriage certificate?" fell from Playden's lips.

"Yes. My dear sir, why do you look at me like that? Marriage certificates are not ghosts. They're quite common, I assure you."

Rufus steadied himself with an effort. He even smiled.

"Of course,—to—be sure," he said, hurriedly. "It—er—that is to say, it—yes, it struck me as queer that she should have brought her marriage certificate with her. That isn't customary, is it?"

He wondered if the doctor could see the moisture that had suddenly sprung out on his forehead.

"In ordinary circumstances, no. But, you see, Mrs. Jaggard may have decided it would be safer to have it with her, simply as a matter of—ah—self-protection."

"I don't quite get you," muttered Rufus, his brain in a whirl. Could this man be speaking the truth? Did Barbara have a marriage certificate?

"In the event that questions were asked before or after her baby was born, Mr. Playden," said the doctor, significantly. "You see, we might have doubted her story about being married to that young man if—well, you understand. It sometimes happens, you know."

Rufus wet his lips. They were dry,—his throat was dry. He had a strange feeling that his temples were bulging out grotesquely, alarmingly.

"Certainly. Of course. I—I hadn't thought of that. A perfect stranger and—and quite alone," he stammered.

Then suddenly, his voice slightly raised and without inflection: "You say you have it in your safe? Her marriage certificate? Hers and—and Benjamin Jaggard's?"

Dr. Fryberg stared. "Certainly. See here, has there been a question raised as to the legality of her marriage to young Jaggard?"

Rufus swallowed hard. "No,—no, indeed. No question at all. Of course not."

"I thought that perhaps his relatives might be—ah—nasty, you know. Relatives very frequently are."

"Would you mind letting me see that certificate?" said Rufus in a strained, hard voice.

The doctor was suddenly suspicious. "You seem to be what you represent yourself to be, sir,—a member of the firm of—of—er—Playden & Crouse" (he picked up from his desk and glared at the letter Rufus had presented) "representing Mrs. Jaggard's family. But if you don't mind, Mr. Playden, I must refuse to allow any one of her possessions to leave my hands. I am responsible for them. I will be glad to show you the certificate."

Rufus bowed. "Thank you," he mumbled. He kept his eyes lowered.

The doctor opened the safe and produced a bulky envelope from which he extracted a closely rolled document, bound by a baby-blue ribbon neatly tied in a bowknot. Rufus followed him to the window, his legs like wood, his eyes now fixed on the paper which was being unrolled and spread out. Standing shoulder to shoulder with the doctor, he stared at the sheet of thick, crackling paper the other was holding to the light. After a moment's silence, the former turned quickly and said:

"I beg pardon. What did you say?"

The young man had murmured an almost inaudible "Good God!" He did not answer. For the moment he heard nothing, he knew nothing except that he was looking upon the thing that made the killing of Bennie Jaggard unneces-

sary. He saw names, familiar names, written in a bold, careful hand, filling the spaces left blank in the regular printed form.—“Benjamin Jaggard” and “Barbara Lee Wayne.”—a date line, “May the sixth, 1909.”—the signature of the minister, “James Herbert Edgefallow,” and two witnesses.

Involuntarily, perhaps unconsciously, he repeated the date: “May the sixth, 1909. May the sixth. Yes, that was the day. May the sixth, 1909.”

“Exactly,” said the doctor. “As *plain* as day, you might say, Mr. Playden.”

Rufus came to earth with a start. He succeeded fairly well in collecting his wits.

“‘Cook County, Illinois,’” he read, in an offhand, casual manner. “May the sixth. That was the day they left Hurdleford. I remember it very well.” There was a strident note in his voice, however, that caused it to sound unnatural to him. Then abruptly: “Thank you, doctor. I won’t keep you any longer. Good afternoon.”

He was striding swiftly toward the door when the doctor inquired: “You will call in to-morrow morning?”

“Oh,—yes. Yes, indeed,” replied Rufus, without turning.

He was out in the corridor an instant later and hurrying toward the street entrance. The doctor, standing in the office door, looked after him in some astonishment. He would have been dumbfounded if he could have heard the words that issued in a hoarse whisper from Rufus’s lips as he shuffled blindly, unseeing down the stone steps to the sidewalk.

“God Almighty! I didn’t kill her seducer. I killed her husband! God Almighty!”

He was weak and trembling when he came at last to the hotel where he was stopping. Going at once to his room, he threw himself on the bed. For hours,—he knew not how many,—he lay there flat on his back staring up at the ceiling, nor did he notice the darkness that began to fill the

room when evening fell, turning the white walls first to somber gray and then to a dense black.

He was not in a stupor. His mind had never been so active, so keen, so alive with thought as now, but it knew nothing, gave heed to nothing outside of its own desperation.

At the back of it, persistently creeping forward only to be lost in a wilderness of thoughts, was something that might be described as a sense of rejoicing born of the horrible discovery, paradoxical as it may sound, that Barbara was pure, that she was a wife and not a mistress, that she was a virtuous woman and not a bawd. Notwithstanding Eva Joslin's testimony,—and he did not question it,—she was Bennie's wife. . . .

Then, slowly but clearly, out of all this maze, he began to see a steady, revealing light. He saw, or believed he saw, through everything: Bennie's contemptible, shameless strategy; Barbara's ignorance and trust; the scurvy deception of old Absalom.

He figured it out in this way: Bennie had tricked all of them; he had denied Barbara in order that he might profit by her degradation; deliberately, willfully he had lied about her to his father and he had accomplished his purpose, for Absalom, believing him, had changed his will,—ah, how plain the whole infernal business was to Rufus, now that his eyes were open. He pictured poor, innocent Barbara waiting, trusting, wondering, suffering alone in the agony of—

He sprang up from the bed, his hands clenched; Bennie Jaggard was there in the room with him and he was snarling curses at him through his teeth. He was seeing in the dark. As if he were actually speaking to the object of his fury, he shouted:

"I'm glad I killed you. I wish I could do it again,—I wish to God I could do it a thousand times. You didn't get away with it, did you, you dirty——" and his blasphemy was all the more frightful because it was foreign to his

lips. Rufus Playden was not a profane man. To him the unpardonable sin was blasphemy, and yet he was cursing as he had never heard man curse before.

Suddenly he checked the vicious torrent. He became as still as death itself, his eyes searching the incomprehensible darkness, his ears alert and straining. He had realized with a sickening shock that his mad mouthings may have been overheard by people in the hall outside or in the room next door.

The darkness puzzled him. Something had happened to him. Why was it so dark and strange? At last he tiptoed softly over to the door above which a transom let in a dull oblong bar of light. There he listened intently, fearfully. People would think he was crazy; they would be sending for some one to take him in charge; they would be—— But there was not a sound outside. He opened the door a few inches. The hall was empty. Fumbling along the wall he found the electric button and pushed on the lights. His hand shook as he looked at his watch. Unwilling to trust his eyes, he held it up to his ear. It was ticking. So it *was* nearly eight o'clock. He had been lying there on the bed for five hours!

As he lifted his hand to his wet brow he experienced a queer and to him, even in his dismay, laughable shock. His soft hat was still on his head, pushed forward almost to the bridge of his despised nose. It was a short, spasmodic chuckle that broke from his lips as he turned to gaze upon himself in the looking-glass over the bureau. What he beheld there caused him to laugh out loud. He had not removed his overcoat. His hat was crushed and crumpled out of shape by contact with the pillow.

"Well, of all the blamed fools!" he cried out, and instantly whirled to shoot a look of apprehension at the closed door, his face sobering. Under his breath he muttered: "I've got to cut out talking to myself like this. It's a terrible habit. Next thing I know I'll say something——"

He broke off abruptly, compressing his lips as if to check any further flow of words. For a few moments he studied his features in the looking-glass, watching the slow process of transformation that was taking place under his determined effort to regain the composure he had lost. Presently he took off his hat and smoothed it out. Then he brushed his rumpled hair. He was calmer,—he could see that and feel it. In a little while he would be master of himself once more,—cool, collected, self-possessed. . . . A quarter of an hour later, he sauntered downstairs and out into the crisp night air.

It was nearly ten o'clock when he joined the few customers in a stuffy lunch wagon near the post office, seated himself at the counter and ordered abundantly of sausages, griddle-cakes, coffee and apple pie. For the better part of two hours he had wandered about the town, debating with himself the problem that now confronted him.

The whole situation was altered. He could no longer look upon himself as an avenger. As for the Wayne boys, notwithstanding their innocence and despite the verdict that had openly applauded would now look with some sort of repugnance upon them; the whole community, aghast at the tragic blunder, would turn its belated sympathy to Bennie Jaggard, even though it remained a fact that he had purposely tricked his dying father.

He did not like to think of what Hurdleford would say when it found out that Barbara Wayne had not been wronged; he did not like to even speculate on the horror that would fill men's souls when they learned the truth about Barbara and Bennie, and the baby that came long after its father's life was snuffed out by—(he shuddered as with a great chill)—by one of Barbara's brothers!

For now, more inflexible than ever, he was determined never to confess his crime. He would suffer a thousand deaths rather than tell Barbara that he had slain her hus-

band. The world believed that one of her brothers did the killing; there was nothing to be gained, perhaps indeed nothing to be lost, by allowing her to think as the world did. She could forgive her brothers, conceiving them to be guilty, but she could never forgive him even though his own deathless love for her had inspired the deed. No matter how badly Bennie may have treated her or how scurvily he had maligned her she would gladly see his jealous slayer go to the gallows. The secret was locked up in his breast,—and there it would stay forever. Nothing could drag it out. There had been times,—indeed, no farther away than the hour that saw him buying roses for Bennie Jaggard's "leavings,"—when, under the influence of reckless self-exaltation, he actually considered telling her that it was he who took the life of her betrayer. Aye, he might even have gone farther than that and boasted about it!

But things were different now. He could not boast about shooting her husband down in cold blood,—without giving him a chance. He did not so much mind her thinking of him as a murderer as he revolted against the certainty that she would look upon him as a coward.

He ate heartily. The griddle-cakes were good. Not since his college days had he eaten griddle-cakes and sausage late at night. He decided then and there that he would do so quite frequently from now on. There was a little place on Center Street where they made batter-cakes on a hot soapstone in plain view of passers-by. He had often looked in at the window on winter nights—yes, after this, he would make a point of dropping in every once in a while to have a "stack." Especially on nights when he had to sit up late, working. And coffee—why, coffee never kept him awake, no matter what time of night he drank it. Come to think of it, he was sure he would enjoy another "stack" of cakes right now. And he ordered them.

He had settled upon a course of action not only for the future but for the present. Nothing could be clearer than

the course he had chosen. The wind had shifted suddenly, bewilderingly, but he would steer according to the way it was blowing now. What Barbara did not know would not hurt her; what she did know could not hurt him. Strangely enough, he was glad that she was Bennie's wife. She was a good woman. She could go back to Hurdleford and she could look people in the face. She was nobody's "leavings." This baby of hers was no bastard. And if she should decide to marry again—well, no man need hesitate to ask her to be his wife.

Back in his mind, indefinite and unformed, was something else that would have shocked him beyond calculation if he had known that it existed, even without shape and intangible: a sly, guilty elation that had for its foundation the knowledge that she was now Bennie Jaggard's widow.

He did not sleep well that night. He blamed it on the coffee and the griddle-cakes.

CHAPTER FOUR

STAMPED WITH A CAMEO RING

SEVERAL days elapsed before Rufus was permitted to see Barbara. Meanwhile he telegraphed his father to expect a communication of the most vital importance, and followed the despatch immediately with a long letter in which he set forth the new and startling developments, urging the judge to repair at once to Chicago for the purpose of obtaining positive verification of Barbara's marriage. With this proof in hand there could be no longer the slightest question as to the disposition of Jaggard's estate.

He had himself well in hand when he went to see Barbara. His nerves were steeled. Nevertheless he hoped she would not have the baby with her. He could not bear the thought of Bennie Jaggard's child being present when he stood and looked down into its mother's dark, wondering eyes. It would be almost as if Bennie himself were lying there, watching him like a hawk; as if Bennie's dead eyes, come to life again, were spying upon him.

Barbara had experienced a sickening chill of alarm, a sinking of the heart, when they told her the day before that a young Mr. Playden from her home town had arrived to see her. Notwithstanding the telegram from Playden & Crouse, conveying to her the word that Mr. Jaggard was ill and that some one from their office who was then in the east would run up to pay his respects, she sensed disaster when she learned who the visitor was.

Rufus Playden was not there as a friend of Bennie Jaggard's. She leaped to the almost instantaneous conclusion that he came in the capacity of attorney for Absalom Jaggard, and that could mean but one thing: Bennie's father

had succeeded in weaning him away from her and had instructed his lawyers to approach her with a view to seeing what could be done in the way of a legal separation. There was something very significant in the statement that "Mr. Jaggard was ill." Which Mr. Jaggard? The frown on her brow deepened and the light in her eyes grew harder as she lay there speculating by the hour as to the nature of the proposition Playden & Crouse were authorized to make at the instigation of the two Jaggards.

She pictured thus-wise: Bennie had failed; beaten, he had surrendered to the will of his father; he had been forced to give her up or lose the fortune, and he had chosen the former course. She saw through the whole contemptible business. So, instead of going to pieces and suffering a dangerous relapse, she set her jaw and waited with sullen grimness for Rufus, the emissary of the Jaggards.

She received her husband's one-time rival with mixed sensations: resentment, uneasiness and a certain undefinable combination of curiosity and chagrin. She had treated Rufus badly,—aye, scurvily. Was he there now to gloat,—smugly and perhaps even generously!—over her? Had he elected to come to her as the representative of the successful lover who now wanted to buy her off, to get rid of her, to humiliate her? Was this to be Rufus's way of taking his revenge, and enjoying it, for what she had done to him when she sneaked off with a low-down Jaggard? If so,—what irony!

She had always liked Rufus Playden. Indeed, there was once a time when she fancied herself to be in love with him. That was before Bennie Jaggard came home from college and, in an ardent, clandestine manner renewed his boyhood suit. But she did not like Rufus now. She could not help feeling that he was there merely for the pleasure he could get out of seeing her squirm. Well, she would fool him. She would tell him and the Jaggards and everybody else to go to the devil!

He stopped just inside the door and gazed at her for a few seconds without speaking.

"How do you do, Rufus?" was her greeting, clear and strong. She held out her hand.

"Hello, Barbara," he said, huskily. He cleared his throat as he advanced toward the bed. The nurse, who had opened the door for him, was close behind. A glance showed him that the baby was not in the bed with Barbara. Some of his embarrassment fell away. He smiled broadly. "Why, you're looking fine. Scrumptious." He clasped her hand, found it warm and firm, and dropped it almost instantly.

"Thank you for the roses, Rufus," she said, and then he caught the tired, strained note in her voice and observed the wan look about her eyes. "I am so glad to see you. Pull that chair over here and sit down. That's right. Don't be afraid. I'm not fragile."

There was no warmth in her eyes when she smiled,—he remembered the scornful, mocking smile of old.

But she was beautiful—to him, transcendently beautiful. Her hair, in two long brown braids, lay across her bosom. Her nightgown was open at the neck, revealing the soft white throat and the first gentle slope of her breast.

"Mr. Playden can stay only a few minutes," said the nurse. "Doctor's orders."

"But I'll come in again, Barbara," said he quickly. "Don't try to talk to-day. I was in New York. Just couldn't help running up to see you."

He turned his head away. The searching and at the same time derisive look in her eyes daunted him.

"You never were a good liar, Rufus," she said.

"I—I beg pardon."

"It's awful to have a reputation for being honest," she chided, lightly. "Never mind. You're here, that's the main point. Sooner or later you'll tell me why. Have you seen my baby?"

"Yes,—er—oh, yes. Just a glimpse of him, you know," he stammered, uncomfortably. He didn't want to talk about the baby. Then he forced himself to add: "Fine baby, Barbara. Splendid baby. Ah—er—congratulations."

"Thanks. When you telegraph back home you might say that mother and babe are doing as well as could be expected." She drew a long breath, as if about to take a plunge. "The telegram said that Mr. Jaggard was ill. I suppose you've told Dr. Fryberg which Mr. Jaggard you meant. Is it my husband?"

"No. It is not your husband," replied Rufus, with an appealing glance at the nurse.

"I hear the doctor out in the hall," said the latter quickly. "I'll call him. He gave orders——"

"I don't care what the doctor's orders are, Miss Fallon," broke in Barbara, curtly. "I've had ample time to think things over for myself and I am prepared for harsh news. I think I know why Mr. Playden is here. I'd rather hear what he has to say now than to be in suspense any longer. I am not such a fool as to believe that he came all the way from Hurdleford to see me unless it was imperative. Don't worry about me. I'm quite all right. I've made up my mind to hear what he has to say, so——"

"Here's the doctor," interrupted the nurse, opening the door. Dr. Fryberg came in. "Mrs. Jaggard insists on hearing what——"

The doctor silenced her with a gesture. Coming over to the bedside, he took up Barbara's wrist and, without a word, began "feeling" her pulse. She watched him with clouded, rebellious eyes. Rufus had crossed over to the window and was looking down into the street.

"It's not very good news, Mrs. Jaggard," said Dr. Fryberg at last.

"You're right," said Barbara simply. "That is, if it's what I think it is. There's no use trying to put me off,

doctor. I've got to hear it now. I can stand it. I can stand anything."

The doctor sat down on the edge of the bed. "I received a telegram from your father a few minutes ago. He is on his way here."

"My—my father? On his way here? To see me?" she murmured, her eyes widening. Then, to the doctor's amazement, they narrowed and seemed actually to glitter; a cynical smile began to twist her lips, and a moment later she uttered a scornful, jeering ejaculation. "And he sends the family lawyer on ahead to prepare the way, eh?"

"My dear Mrs. Jaggard," began the doctor.

She interrupted him, impatiently. "I think I've made a pretty good guess, doctor. If you don't mind, I'll hear what Mr. Playden has to say."

"It's going to be a severe shock. I shall remain in the room."

"I don't see why the family linen should be washed in the presence of——"

Rufus broke in. "I'll come back to-morrow and——"

"We'll get it over with now, Rufus, if you please," she interrupted, firmly. "What do they want me to do?"

"My dear Barbara, it—it isn't what you think," said Rufus, coming to the bedside. "Bennie has had an accident. That's why he couldn't come. It's—it's not his fault that he isn't here with you."

And that is how he started to tell her the story of Bennie Jaggard's death. . . . It was not until late that night that Barbara gave way completely to the anguish that seemed to have rendered her mute and limp and powerless for so many hours and finally found the way to free itself from the fetters. For hours she had lain flat on her back, her eyes closed, her bloodless lips drawn tightly together, her face the color of chalk, her bosom scarcely moving.

In the beginning she had cried out; there were a few moments of pitiful, bewildered grief and horror, and then

this queer, unnatural state of lassitude that was frightening in its very unbelievableness.

Rufus had paused in his recital when this outburst came. He did not resume until she herself, suddenly quiet, whispered hoarsely: "Go on." Later when he hesitated she signified for him to continue, but she did not speak; she did not ask a single question; she allowed him to finish and go away without so much as a word or look from her. Her eyes were only partially closed,—little slits that glistened with tears for a while and then dried up as if smitten by a blast so hot that it took every bit of vitality out of them, leaving them dead and sightless between matted, unblinking lashes. But she did not miss a word of what he was saying. He faltered when it came time to speak of the charge against her brothers, looking anxiously at the doctor, who nodded his head.

"Don't stop now, Playden. Tell her everything. It's best to have it over with, now that we've begun. It would be cruel to put her through another ordeal later on."

Rufus, hurrying on to the end, wet his parched lips with his tongue and waited for her to speak. She did not move, she did not look at him. No one spoke. For many minutes he stood beside her, but his eyes were not on her face. As if fascinated, he was staring at her tightly clenched fists!

Presently the doctor took up one of the rigid hands and stroked it. Instantly it relaxed. He felt her pulse. Never in all his experience had he seen a woman like this one. He looked at her set, lovely, young face and was filled with wonder. Her heart was beating regularly, strongly. He understood. She was "holding in"! Never had he known a woman like this one.

"You'd better go now, Mr. Playden," he said loudly to Rufus, watching to see the effect on Barbara.

She merely nodded her head,—and Rufus went away. He wondered if he would ever see her alive again. His soul was full of bitterness and despair. Had he killed Barbara too?

Worse, had it been in her heart to strike him with those clenched fists?

When at last, hours afterward, she broke under the strain, her grief was tempestuous. Everything in her virile, passionate nature was swept into this vortex of agony. She had "held in" as long as she could; she had fought in vain to keep from making a spectacle of herself before these strangers; she had tried to be as brave as those gentle Wayne women who, in times past, had suffered blows as hard and as blighting. Gradually her wild, hysterical cries and moans subsided; utterly exhausted, she fell to sobbing like a tired, beaten child, and was content, even glad to let the nurse hold her hand and smooth her tortured brow. After a while, she slept,—and still she sobbed.

She realized. Bennie was dead! Her beloved Bennie was dead. How she had wronged him in her thoughts! He had not failed her. He had played the game and it had cost him his life.

The grim and horrible truth reared itself up to face her, as it was going to face her all the rest of her life: she had sent Bennie Jaggard to his death.

He had played *her* game, not his. At her behest, in compliance with her unholy urging, he had tricked his father; the lie that damned her in old Absalom's eyes and gave him back his place in old Absalom's heart had been told at her bidding. It was useless now for her to try to derive comfort from the knowledge that she had willingly sacrificed herself so that he might come rightly into his own, that he might regain what she in her love, had taken away from him. Instead of that, she had sacrificed him. There was no other way to look at it in the light of what had happened. The lie she had induced him to tell was the real cause of his death. She had glibly sent him out there to be murdered.

Deep down in her soul she cursed these brothers of hers. Reason should have argued that they killed for her sake

only, but it did nothing of the sort; they killed Bennie simply because he was a Jaggard who had put the Waynes to scorn. They were glad to have the excuse and the chance. And how she had adored them up to this time! She abhorred them now with all her heart because in silencing Bennie they had convicted him for all time of the foulest, the most despicable act a man could commit. Nothing that she could say or do would ever remove the ugly stain, nothing could set Bennie right in the eyes of the world. On the contrary, it might have forgiven him and perhaps felt a little sympathy for him if his story about her had been true, but it would excoriate him forever for having wantonly lied about her that he might set himself straight with the father who was about to die and who weakly fell into the trap his unspeakable son had laid.

And all Hurdleford would know that another Jaggard had run true to form, that the last of them had sacrificed everything to greed.

She was helpless. She realized that she could do nothing to justify him in the eyes of the world,—not even if she were to confess her own share in the miserable conspiracy. That would only serve to increase the ignominy under which he was buried. Her first impulse to reveal everything died almost immediately after its birth. Despite her grief and a queer sort of rage that overwhelmed her for the time being, she was aware of an ever-growing realization that her own lips must remain sealed forever.

Before she fell asleep this had become a profound, even desperate conviction. Bennie's boy had to be considered. He must never know the truth about his mother. She did not care what other people thought,—she could laugh at them. But Bennie's boy must never suspect that his mother sent his father out there to die in order that one day he might reap the golden harvest of their joint duplicity.

Finally, a day or two later, she asked if Rufus had returned to Hurdleford. Learning that he was still there and

that her father was expected that evening she sent for him. He came at once. She was conscious of a swift, almost giddy feeling of relief when he entered the room; it was as if a heavy, pressing weight suddenly had been snatched away and she was free to take a long, full, luxurious breath. Good old Rufus! Kind, gentle, dependable, old Rufus! He was there to look out for her.

She could rely on him. He would see her through. Her heart swelled, the tears came to her eyes,—for here was a friend to whom she could turn and who would never fail her. She knew it; down in her soul she knew that he would never fail her. And only a day or two ago she had looked upon him as an enemy come to scoff and jeer at her. How she had misjudged him,—good, honest, old Rufus!

He was smiling as he came over to her. Through a mist of tears she could see nothing save those brilliant, beautiful eyes of his,—and they were smiling. His huge nose, his twisted mouth, his narrow face,—they were all a part of the wonderful smile that was in his eyes and so she did not even notice them. She held out her hands to him. He took them in his and pressed them gently.

"Oh,—pshaw! Don't cry, Barbara," he murmured an instant later, bending over as sobs broke from her lips.

For answer she withdrew her hands and threw her arms about his neck, clinging to him as she wept unrestrainedly.

"You—you mustn't mind, Rufus," she sobbed chokingly, her face averted. "I can't help it. I am so lonely, I am so unhappy. You are so—so good, Rufus."

His body stiffened. It seemed to him that his heart stopped beating. He thanked God she could not see his face, for he knew it was ashen, ghastly. She might just as well have driven a knife into his heart as to do the thing she was now doing out of the fullness of her lonely heart.

Her arms fell away. He straightened up, clutching the headboard for support. By the time she had dried her eyes with her handkerchief he had recovered some of his

shattered composure, which had been none too good to start with. He managed a smile.

"That—that will do you good, Barbara," he said thickly. "Don't pay any attention to me. Just go ahead and—and cry."

He turned his back and walked over toward the window. They were alone in the room. Presently she spoke to him.

"Come here, Rufus. I am all right now. I just couldn't help letting go."

"That's all right," he said, gruffly. "I understand. You—you just had to let go. It's been terrible for you. Terrible. It's awfully good of you to let me come to see you. I thought maybe you'd hate me for being the one to break the news to you. Some one else should have come, Barbara."

He pulled a chair up near the bed.

"I am glad it was you, Rufus," she said, after a moment. "I know how hard it must have been. You've been very kind and thoughtful and—and brave. I could never have done it. Listen, Rufus" (she held out her hand to him) —"I don't deserve anything generous of you. I—I treated you pretty shabbily. I'm sorry,—I'm ashamed, Rufus. Perhaps you'll forgive me—you can't forget, of course."

"You can rest assured of one thing, Barbara. I wouldn't have come down here to see you if I had had it in for you. Let it go at that."

"I loved Bennie, Rufus,—I loved him better than anything else in the world," she said softly. "That explains a lot, doesn't it?"

"Yes. I understood."

They were silent for a short time. When she spoke, it was in a dull, emotionless tone.

"You had a hard, a terribly hard task to perform, telling me about Bennie and—and everything. I sent for you so that I could thank you. I want to thank you for everything

you have done for me, Rufus. I say that from the bottom of my heart."

For a few seconds he stared at her, speechless. She thanked *him*! A swift, blinding flood of red surged up to his face. She was thanking him for what he had done for her! The irony of it, the horrible grotesque irony of it! It seemed hours before he could speak.

"Oh,—it was nothing," he stammered lamely, and she, in her ignorance, smiled.

"It's just like you, Rufus, to say it was nothing."

"Let's say no more about it," he said, hurrying the words. "I—I don't want to be thanked. Good Lord, Barbara," he burst out; "how can you thank me for telling you that your—your husband has been killed and that your brothers are believed to have——"

"Hush! You mustn't say it, Rufus. Still I want you to know how much I appreciate what you've done for me after—well, after the way I treated you. You might have left it to some one else,—my father, for instance,—to come here and tell me what a dog Bennie was. I'll not forget it, Rufus. Never. You didn't like Bennie but you—you——" She choked up.

"There, there, now! Did they tell you Mr. Wayne is expected this evening?"

"Yes. I am not sure that I shall be glad to see him. I ought to be, I know, but——" She pressed her fingers to her lips.

"He loves you, Barbara."

Her eyes narrowed, transforming her in a flash. "Did he believe that I wasn't married to Bennie?" she demanded abruptly.

"I—I'm sure I don't know," he stammered.

"My brothers believed it of me," she went on stonily. "I suppose you'll say they loved me too, Rufus."

"I know they did,—I know they do. They adore you."

"They prove it by thinking I was Bennie Jaggard's mistress,—yes, what some people call a prostitute," she sneered. Suddenly she turned her head and fixed him with a direct, questioning gaze. "Did you believe he was not my husband?"

"Now, Barbara——"

"Did you believe I was living with him without being married to him?"

He regarded her with well-assumed severity. "Of course I didn't," he replied, quite himself once more. "I didn't believe a word of it. I knew you too well, Barbara, to even think such a thing."

"Well, then," she began hotly, "it's a damned pity that my own people couldn't have known as well as you did."

Rufus was startled. He had never heard her use the word "damn" before. It affected him unpleasantly.

"They were beside themselves, I suppose," he muttered. He bit his lip. He hadn't meant to say that. It was virtually an admission that he believed one of her brothers had killed Bennie Jaggard.

"Do you think that Eva Joslin made up the whole story?" she demanded. If he had been watching her face he would have caught the anxious, worried gleam in her eyes. But he was not looking at her.

He had prepared himself for this very question. Sooner or later, she was sure to ask it.

"I am convinced, Barbara, that Eva told the truth," he replied. "I hate to say it, but I believe she did hear Bennie tell his father that he had never married you."

For a long time she was silent, save for the faint, choking sniff that follows the shedding of tears. Her eyes, quite dry now, were fixed on the darkening ceiling above. Dusk was stealing into the room. Rufus looked at his watch. The nurse had given him ten minutes.

"My time is almost up," he said at last.

This roused her.

"I want you to begin at the beginning and tell me the whole story over again, Rufus," she said quickly, earnestly. "You needn't be worried about me. I shan't go to pieces. I've had time to get hold of myself. Tell it slowly and don't leave anything out. Parts of it I missed the other day. I was stunned, I guess. I want to know about his funeral and what people really think of—of Bennie."

The nurse came in but, after a brief stay, went out again, gratified but hardly surprised by her patient's composure. Miss Fallon had "doped it out" that this puzzling young woman was secretly glad her husband was dead.

Rufus was not averse to the re-telling of the story. He was sorely conscious of having bungled it on that first trying occasion. Moreover, there was every reason to believe that much of what he said then had fallen on deaf or uncomprehending ears. So he welcomed the opportunity she now opened for him to repeat the story when he was in full control of himself and not harassed by his own or her emotions.

He was cool-headed now; he would not bungle it. And he had lived in a sort of dread ever since that first day, fearing in his soul that she would refuse even to speak to him again after what he had done to her. It was too good to be true,—certainly more than he could have hoped for. She did not despise him. She looked upon him as friend, protector, counselor,—and she had thanked him! She had put her arms around his neck like a trusting child and—yes, she did admit that she had treated him badly!

Barbara listened closely, intently, almost breathlessly. He marveled at her self-control,—and at his own, for that matter. It was hard to speak calmly and in an ordered, matter-of-fact way with those brooding eyes fixed unwaveringly on his from start to finish. Several times she interrupted with questions that must have wrenched her heart but not once did her voice break or her eyes fill. Toward the end he began to experience a queer, nauseating sen-

sation of alarm. Was she looking into his brain through those dark, searching eyes of hers, and was she reading there the truth that could not be told?

But it was over at last. The palms of his hands were wet as with ice water.

"You're—you're very brave, Barbara," he said.

"Or cold-hearted,—which?"

"You are not that, my dear girl. Never that."

"I am not so sure, Rufus," she said, closing her eyes. A slight shudder ran over her. A moment later she looked at him again. "I don't believe my heart will ever be warm again."

"Don't say that, Barbara."

"How can it be?" she cried fiercely. "It is buried with Bennie."

A sullen rage prompted him. "But he *did* lie about you," he grated. "If he hadn't lied about you he wouldn't be where he is now. If he——"

"Wait! I see, Rufus. You do not blame my brothers for killing him. Is that it? Don't be afraid to say so if you really feel it."

He drew a long breath. "I do not blame your brothers, Barbara," he said at last.

Her eyes flashed. "But from what you tell me, he wasn't given a chance to explain. He wasn't——"

"Nobody on earth knows what took place or what was said in the lane that night except the man who did the shooting," he interrupted. "Please do not overlook that, Barbara."

"I forgot you are a lawyer," she said sulkily. "Oh, forgive me, Rufus, for being disagreeable. You've been so kind and thoughtful. Please go now, before I say anything more. Come to-morrow. After I've seen my father. I will need you then, I'm afraid. There is no one else on whom I can depend now but you, Rufus."

"Good heavens! Your father loves you. He would lay down his life for you. Don't say——"

She held up her hand. Her eyes were hard, her voice low and intense.

"He loves his sons too. That's the hard part of it. It will not make him love me any better—or as much, perhaps,—when I tell him that never as long as I live will I speak to George or Tom or touch their hands. I mean it!"

"Good God!"

"My brothers turned against me for marrying Bennie. I have turned against them for killing him. They can't bring Bennie back and so they sha'n't have me back."

"Oh, I say, Barbara——"

"I don't know which one did it, but with my own hands I could kill the one who didn't if he so much as breathed a word against his brother. But no fear of that! No fear of that. I know them. Thank God, Rufus, they're made of better stuff than that. They're gentlemen"—and here her lip curled—"even though one of them is an assassin."

As he was leaving the room a moment or two later, she called out to him.

"Just a second, please. I am a little hazy on one point. Granted that Bennie did lie to his father about me,—perhaps, as you intimate, with the intention of reinstating himself,—am I to understand that Mr. Jaggard definitely altered his will, leaving everything to Bennie?"

"Yes. That is true. Practically everything."

"I am now speaking to you as a lawyer. Is there any reason why you cannot serve in that capacity for me, Rufus? I mean, have you no hard feelings toward me?"

"Bless you,—no. If I can be of service to you now or at any time, you have only to say so. I suppose you know that as Bennie's widow you have a claim to at least a third of his estate?"

"But he made a will leaving everything he had to me, Rufus," was her astonishing announcement.

His eyes flew open. "Bennie left a—a will?"

"Yes. He made it shortly after we were married. He didn't have anything much to leave then, it's true, but—well, we both made our wills, Rufus." She spoke quietly, —in a dull, listless tone.

He came back to the bedside.

"Where is this will of his?" he asked, almost accusingly.

"Both of them are in my trunk, each in a sealed envelope. We—we"—her chin quivered and tears came to her eyes—"we laughed fit to kill over the solemn, ceremonious way in which we—— Oh, I can't talk about it!"

He waited until she regained control of herself before putting the all-important question.

"Was it properly witnessed and—and all that?" His voice shook with excitement.

"Oh, yes. He was very particular about that. He said a will wasn't legal unless it was witnessed by at least two persons."

Rufus steadied his voice, assuming a firm, professional air.

"Where is this trunk of yours, Barbara?"

"Here in the hospital somewhere. I saw the envelopes when I got out my marriage certificate a—a little while ago. They're sealed with red wax, stamped with Bennie's cameo ring. You—you remember his cameo ring, don't you?"

He nodded. He remembered seeing it on one of the pallid hands that were crossed over Bennie's breast as he lay in the coffin. He remembered that he looked at Bennie's hands that day because he dared not look at his face.

CHAPTER FIVE

THE FRIEND OF THE FAMILY

AFTER many days, Shelby Wayne wrote to his sons. The letter was addressed to the "Wayne Brothers" and was as follows:

"MY DEAR SONS: Barbara is coming to Hurdleford with me when she is able to travel. That ought to be in about ten days or so. She refuses to go to our house. I suppose she is right. I have not urged her to change her mind. Rufus Playden who left here a day or two ago suggested a plan when he found out how determined she was about not living in her old home. I may as well say that both Barbara and I refused to consider it. He will probably tell you about it when he sees you but in case he does not I will do so now. It was his idea for you boys to go somewhere else to live. Barbara opposed the plan and of course you must know that I would never listen to any such arrangement. My home is yours and will be as long as you choose to stay there. If you were to leave it now it would look as if I had turned you out in favor of Barbara. You know I could never be guilty of that. It seems a hard thing for a father to say but even if it were left to me to decide I should choose you boys instead of Barbara. I am glad to say that she does not make it necessary for me to choose. She says she would die before she would step in between us now or at any time. She wants to be fair. So she is going straight to the Jaggard place to live. I am sorry to say that she refuses to have anything to do with either of you. I suppose it is natural for her to feel that way at present. She was very

fond of him. We cannot decide these things for her. I am saying this to you so you will make no attempt to plead with her. Time may change her but at present she is very bitter toward both of you. Now as to present plans. Rufus Playden will meet us at Radley with an automobile and take Barbara straight to the house on the hill. She will bring a nurse with her to look out for her and the baby. I guess we Waynes must be a mighty stubborn, bull-headed lot and foolish in a good many ways. I was obliged to tell Barbara that I shall never put foot inside that Jaggard house even though it is the home of my own daughter and in spite of the affection I have for her. She cried at first when I told her that but finally she said she guessed she knew how I felt, being a Wayne herself. So Rufus will drop me at our gate that evening on the way over from Radley and take her on up to her new home. The train gets to Radley about eight o'clock and it will be dark. She is very particular about keeping the day of her arrival secret. She don't want a soul to know about it except Rufus and Mrs. Robbins. If it was not for the fact that she and her son are obliged to live there under the terms of Absalom Jaggard's will she would not even consider returning to Hurdleford. But it seems she has to and she is going to make the best of it. She inherits everything under her husband's will which Rufus and I have seen. He is in New York now seeing the witnesses to the document and arranging about probating it in proper time and form. It will be strange to have a Wayne up there in that infernal house looking down on the rest of us but that is going to be the case. My own daughter and your sister will have us hedged in just as the Jaggards did. No matter which way we turn we will behold her lands sort of choking us you might say. I can hardly believe this queer thing has come to pass. She knows how I feel about Benjamin Jaggard and the means he took to make himself rich at her expense and she knows how I hate the very

thought of a child of mine owning a foot of Jaggard land or a penny of Jaggard money. We have talked very plainly about it and we are never going to mention the subject again. It is a closed book from now on. I never liked Absalom Jaggard but I must say he deserved a better fate than to have a Wayne up there in his house living on the fat of his land. I am not mean enough to wish that he could know what has happened since he died.

"I will close now. Rufus will see you in a few days and give you all the details. He is in possession of all the facts, some of which you already know. He has been a wonderful friend and comfort to all of us. I shall never forget how hard he worked for you boys at the time of the trial and I can never repay him for his kindness and devotion to Barbara. Not even her own brothers could have done more for her than Rufus has done.

"Your loving father,

"SHELBY WAYNE.

"P.S.—Barbara is doing nicely and so is her baby. It seems queer that my first grandson should be a Jaggard, don't it? I know it is wrong and unjust but I cannot help thinking that one of his great-great-grandfathers stole our horses and we hung him for it over a hundred years ago.

"S.W."

Hurdleford experienced a shock but little short of an earthquake when it heard the truth about Barbara and Bennie. Long before the *Evening Express* came out with its full page, double-leaded revelations the story was on the lips of every one and a sort of hush as of stupefaction fell upon the town. As time wore on Hurdleford found its voice and in every home, store and street people of all degrees discussed the new and somewhat paralyzing situation.

First and foremost, there was the terrible position in which the Wayne boys found themselves now that it was

positively established as a fact that Bennie Jaggard was their brother-in-law and that he had not wronged their sister. They had made a frightful, irretrievable blunder. Bennie (it seemed only just to speak of him now as *poor*)—Bennie was dead and in his grave as the result of their terrible mistake. It is only fair to say that people were sorrier for the wretched Wayne boys than they were for “poor Bennie.”

Several virtuous, high-minded citizens, moved by a tremendous reaction, were for lynching both of the young men, but they were soon squelched by other high-minded citizens and the talk died out almost at once. After all, Bennie *had* maligned their sister,—nobody for an instant doubted the veracity of the unhappy Eva Joslin,—and when all was said and done *perhaps* young Jaggard did get “what was coming to him.”

Strange to say, no one felt what might be described as sorry for Absalom Jaggard’s son. It was quite clear to every one that he deliberately had tricked his dying father into changing his will, at the same time unintentionally tricking one of the innocent Wayne boys into committing the crime of murder.

After due deliberation Hurdleford returned to its original estimate, briefly upset by a passing attack of shivers, and once more put Bennie down as an all-around bad egg and not fit to live among decent people. Most certainly he was not fit to live with Barbara Wayne after what he had said about her. The Wayne boys did the right thing in ridding both her and the community of the “blasted whelp.” (The epithet was righteously used by no less a personage than the Rev. Mr. Davidson, a devout minister of the gospel, and so may be quoted here with perfect composure.)

Nevertheless, it was a dreadful thing; and try as it would, Hurdleford knew that it would never be able to look at the Wayne boys again without thinking that the blood of Barbara’s husband was on the hands of one of them. Presently

everybody in town was speculating as to the attitude Barbara would take in regard to her brothers. Would she,—or could she, as a matter of fact,—have anything like the same feeling she once had had for them? And what would be the attitude of the boys toward their sister?

If Hurdleford expected any sign from George or Tom Wayne during the days that preceded Barbara's expected return it was disappointed. The two young men went about their business as usual, calmly and deliberately refusing to satisfy a natural and overpowering curiosity on the part of their friendly fellow-citizens. Even Hurdleford appreciated the fact that it was a very disagreeable subject and avoided it with unsuspected delicacy when it met and conversed with the two young men,—which, by the way, was not as often as in other days simply because Hurdleford itself was shy and uncomfortable in the presence of these quiet young men who were about to be put on trial again for the murder of Bennie Jaggard, but not in the presence of judge and jury this time nor with the prospect of the gallows ahead of them. Barbara, their sister, was to sit in judgment. She would sentence them—to what? It should go without saying that Hurdleford wondered and speculated and talked about nothing else for days and days.

Rufus Playden came home from the east. He was the most interesting and the most sought-after person in town until people who had known and admired him all his life began to regard him as an insufferable smart-aleck because he managed to keep his mouth shut about Barbara's affairs notwithstanding a widespread effort that was being made to pry it open. People took exception to the polite and pleasant way in which he declined to satisfy the perfectly natural,—one might almost say municipal,—curiosity that centered upon Barbara and her baby, to say nothing of the will that from all accounts transformed the former clerk at Stidham's Bookstore into the richest young widow in that part of the state. Some went so far as to say, in the

whole United States of America, for there were people in Hurdleford, Indiana, who believed only what they saw and not merely what they heard.

They could see the Jaggard farms, the Jaggard business blocks, the bank that Jaggard owned, and that was enough for them; they could not doubt their eyes but they could be very skeptical about their ears. One merely *heard* about those rich young women in New York and Chicago and Pittsburgh. Wall Street gossip said the wise men of Hurdleford,—and God knows it's sheer ignorance to believe anything that comes out of Wall Street. In any case, Barbara Wayne was about to become a second Hetty Green at a much tenderer age than Mrs. Green herself became Hetty Green,—on the same principle, it will be seen, that Mr. Rockefeller was not John D. Rockefeller at all until he was well past middle age, nor was there any such person, so far as Hurdleford was concerned, as Abraham Lincoln until he ran for President and was elected.

There were niggardly people in Hurdleford—and in Radley, for that matter,—who would have squandered their last penny for the privilege of knowing just what took place when the Wayne boys went up to the office of Playden & Crouse and spent the better part of a late afternoon with Rufus. The few who saw the Waynes come up the street together and disappear up the narrow stairway lost no time in spreading the news. Before long it was all over town, so to speak, that a "conference" of vital importance was being held up there behind the frost-screened windows of the "Judge's" office.

A patient vigil ensued. From the shelter of shop doors and windows in the immediate vicinity merchant and customer alike spent the waning hours in close observation, waiting for the Waynes to emerge. People who had been in a hurry only a little while before lingered indefinitely in the hope of seeing something; dusk fell; but the street lights came on, greatly to the relief of watchers who feared

the boys might come out under cover of darkness, so to speak, thereby rendering their faces more or less indistinguishable.

Notwithstanding the fact that the day was cold and a fierce wind was blowing, pedestrians, lured from the comfort of warm interiors by the exciting news that had gone up and down the street by word of mouth and wire, passed and re-passed the block, their watery eyes alert. The dentist's office directly across the way contained an unusual number of eyes; the dressmaking establishment of Miss Hannah O'Leary, one flight up, suspended work at four o'clock so that patrons and seamstresses alike could hover about the front windows; two rival law offices, a pool-room, a tailor shop, a photograph gallery and various other second- or third-storey enterprises in the block had their windows scraped free of frost for the first time since the cold spell set in. At the corner above, the barroom of the Hoffman House filled up an hour or two ahead of time in the hope that George and Tom Wayne, under the strain, might feel inclined to repent of their abstemiousness and seek comfort in conviviality.

But nothing of consequence happened. Shortly before six o'clock the two young men emerged from the offices of Playden & Crouse, pausing in the shelter of the hallway to light their pipes before striding briskly off down street in the direction of their place of business. They had gone but a few yards when they were joined by Charlie Jones, the city editor of the *Express*, who strolled nonchalantly out of Hedrick's cigar store just in time to intercept them.

"Well, anything new, boys?" inquired Mr. Jones, giving vent to his customary salutation.

"Nope," replied George Wayne, quite affably, much to Charlie's disgust.

"Anybody coming or going?" pursued Mr. Jones, also a customary question of his.

"Not that I know of," said Tom. "Train from the north

was two hours late this afternoon,—but I suppose you know that already, Charlie.”

“Sure. She isn’t in yet. Expecting anybody on her?”

“No.”

For twenty paces the trio walked along in silence. Then Charlie took the bull by the horns.

“Have you heard when Barbara is expected home?”

“Sometime after the first, I believe. That’s all I know about it,” said George.

“Had any word from your father?”

“Just letters,” replied Tom, succinctly. “Gosh, it’s cold, isn’t it? Must be nearly down to zero.”

“Terribly cold for this time of year,” admitted Charlie.

“Wouldn’t surprise me in the least if we had a long, cold winter, starting off in November like this,” said George.

“I thought maybe there was something new about the will or something,” ventured Charlie, “seeing as you were up in Judge Playden’s office for quite a while.”

“There’s nothing new about it,” said George, puffing vigorously at his pipe.

“We didn’t even discuss it,” vouchsafed Tom.

“Well,—so long,” said Charlie.

“So long,” said both of the Wayne boys, quite cheerily, thought Charlie.

Down in the seclusion of their office, however, the Waynes were not cheerful. They had little to say to each other and when they did speak it was with an obvious and unmistakable effort to make conversation. Rufus had told them of Barbara’s apparently unshakeable resolve. They had listened to him in silence, their strong, rugged faces paling as he went on in that calm, even compassionate way that hurt even worse than open-voiced pity. They had nothing to say. They studiously avoided looking at each other for fear that in their gaze the other might detect the appeal that could have been read only as an accusation by the guilty one. When he was through they bowed their

heads and set their lips tight to hide the quiver that was so hard to master, for with all their hearts they loved this sister who was condemning them to an undeserved exile for a crime they had not committed and yet could not deny.

Judge Playden was there. All the time Rufus was speaking he studied the faces of the two Waynes, and as he watched there came to him a strange, indefinable something that could not be called a thought or a feeling or an impression,—something that told him that neither of these boys had killed Bennie Jaggard. He never was to forget that hour. For the first time he began to wonder if Rufus had not been right in maintaining from the outset his belief in the absolute innocence of George and Tom Wayne. But if not George and Tom,—who? Whom were they shielding? For whom were they taking the blame? A horrid thought flashed through his mind. With a feeling of revulsion he cast it out as utterly unthinkable. And then when Rufus placed his hands on the shoulders of the two young men and spoke to them huskily at the end of his disagreeable task, Judge Playden felt deep down in his soul that his son shared the secret with Shelby Wayne's sons,—that the three of them knew who did the killing.

"You know how I feel about it, boys," Rufus was saying. "I have said all along that you did not do it, either of you, and I did my best to make Barbara believe as I do. All she would say was that if you did not do it, then who did? I had no answer for that except my own unalterable conviction that you did not kill her husband. As I said to you a while ago, she surprised me by declaring that there was nothing else for her brothers to do but to kill the man they believed had wronged her and that she would have despised you if you had not done so. I was completely bowled over when she said that, but afterwards I realized what she meant. She was looking at it from your point of view then and not from her own,—and she meant it when she said that you were in duty bound to shoot your sister's betrayer.

As I said before, your father has asked me to tell you exactly how she feels toward you. He admits that he cannot do it himself. I understand how he feels under the circumstances and you ought to understand also. We must not forget one thing. She loved Bennie Jaggard with all her heart and she will never be convinced that he did not love her, no matter how vilely he may have traduced her in order to deceive his father. That's the long and the short of it."

It was George who spoke first. His voice was a little unsteady.

"Yes. I guess that is the long and the short of it. There's nothing more to be said on the subject. I can stand it if Tom can, Rufus."

"It's mighty tough," was all that Tom had to say as he turned toward the door.

And from that day on George and Tom Wayne waited for the first sign of weakening on the part of the other. There was no doubt in the mind of either as to who had killed their sister's husband. Outwardly they betrayed not the slightest evidence of feeling, but inwardly there was an ever-growing bitterness. Always there was expectancy and hope behind the carefully concealed rancor that lay so close to the surface; always there was a question and an invitation in their eyes. Neither could understand the incredible willingness on the part of the other to deprive him of Barbara's love and affection, and yet, had his life depended on it, he would not have asked the question that could only be answered in one way. Sometimes they wondered if the time was not far away when they would hate each other.

They turned to the one man who had shown himself to be their staunch and dependable friend,—Rufus Playden. The time was to come when a secret jealousy sprung up between them over a friendship that had to be divided. Rufus treated them alike; neither could complain that he betrayed a stronger liking for one than for the other; they liked him all the more for that, for down in their honest

hearts and in spite of everything, they would have despised him if he had betrayed the slightest lack of warmth toward the guilty brother. More than all this, they were miserably sorry for each other.

Late in the afternoon of a snowy day toward the end of the first week of December, Rufus walked down to their place of business and informed the brothers that Barbara was to arrive at Radley that night. He did not risk telephoning the news. It would have been all over town by nightfall that she was coming; knowing Hurdleford as he did it would have surprised him if quite a number of her citizens failed to drive over to Radley to "have a look" at the widow of Bennie Jaggard and heiress to all the Jaggard lands. And others who would make it their business to be in the neighborhood of Shelby Wayne's house to see how she greeted and was received by her brothers.

"I thought I'd tell you she is coming to-night, boys," said Rufus, a trace of excitement in his voice, "so that you can be at home when I leave your father there. He will be expecting to see you, of course. It's pretty hard for him, you know."

"Yes,—it is," said George, frowning darkly. "It's mighty tough on dad."

"We'll be at home when he gets there," said Tom, with his slow drawl. "I guess we can let him see that he needn't worry about how we're going to take it. He has declared himself, Rufe. He's going to stick by us. We're not likely to forget that."

"I'll do my best to persuade him to take back what he said about never putting foot inside of the Jaggard home," said the older brother. "It's not fair to Barbara. She's going to live up there and she's his daughter. He loves her—yes, I know that he loves her more than he does either of us. It's only natural he should. He's got her back now and—well, there are no Jaggards up there now to order him off the place if he wants to go and see his own daughter."

Tom gave a short laugh and turned away.

"Nothing up there now but ghosts," he muttered.

Barbara came home that night. Playden met her at Radley with a closed car and drove her to the house on the hill. Shelby Wayne got out at his own front gate.

"Well, I'll see you soon, I hope, Barbara," he said, as he peered back through the open door of the car before closing it. There was a wistful note in his voice. His suitcases stood on the ground at his feet; it did not occur to him to notice that the thickly falling snow was already several inches deep.

She was looking past him through the swirling darkness at the lighted windows, upstairs and down, in the house where she had spent most of a happy, carefree life. A glance showed her that there was no light in the windows of her old room. Two big, shadowy dogs came bounding from the rear of the house, barking fiercely. Recognizing their long-absent master, they began to prance and leap with joy, almost knocking him over.

"Catol!" cried Barbara. "Duke! Don't you know me?"

The dogs had not seen her in more than a year and a half but at the sound of her voice they ceased their leaping and whining for a few seconds, apparently bewildered and undecided. Then they nearly turned themselves inside out in a perfect frenzy of rapture, such as only a dog can feel and express.

George and Tom Wayne, back in the sitting-room from which the road could not be seen, heard the gleeful barkings and knew that the second outbreak was for the girl who had been away so long. They were smoking. Their teeth shut down hard on the amber stems of their pipes; the set muscles stood out like little mounds on the lean jaws.

"Good night, father," murmured Barbara, after a long while. Her voice was husky as if controlled only by the most determined effort.

"The dogs haven't forgotten you," said Shelby Wayne.

"Just look at their tails," said she, pointing to the wriggling beasts who stood in the cloudy path of light from the windows.

"Good night, my dear," said her father, still holding open the door. Then he succeeded in getting out what he had been wanting to say. "This is your old home, Barbara. You will always find it open to you. The dogs are not the only ones here who love you."

"I know that, father," she said in a muffled voice.

"George and Tom love you, my dear."

"I know that too, father."

"Well"—after a pause—"good night again. Good night, Miss Rivers. 'Night, Rufus. Thank you for meeting us."

He closed the door, picked up his bags and strode through the blinding snow toward the open gate. The car started up with a roar, a grinding of gears, a parting volley of rifle shots from the open muffler, and was off on its climb to the top of the hill.

"That's Brink Davis's new limousine," said Tom, knocking the cold ashes out of his pipe.

"I wonder if father has had his supper," said George, getting up and going to the door.

Barbara was silent all the way up the long hill. She huddled down in the corner, facing Rufus who sat opposite on one of the little seats, his back to the driver. The nurse occupied the seat beside her, holding the carefully bundled baby. Their traveling bags were piled up in front beside the driver. It was impossible for her to see ahead on account of the screen-like snowstorm. Nothing lay out there beyond the half-raised windshield except the dull, wavering patch of yellowish white that could not be overtaken and passed.

She was frightened. She had never been inside of the house on the hill. She was about to put foot inside it for the first time,—the home of the despised Jaggards. Her narrowed, peering eyes nevertheless were fixed on the

spreading patch of light out there in front. It seemed to be leading up to a black, impenetrable wall through which, sooner or later, she would have to crash.

Barbara knew then that she was not going home, that she never would have the feeling of going home, no matter how long she lived in that grim, forbidden house on the hill.

Rufus too had fallen silent. For a little while he had made spasmodic ventures in the way of conversation, efforts made at considerable cost to his own power of concentration, for he too was approaching a hated, fearsome spot. Every now and then the nurse would inquire, peevishly: "How much farther is it now?" Rufus would reply: "Oh, only a little way, Miss Rivers. We'll soon be there." And always Barbara would repeat to herself: "Yes, I'll soon be there."

He peered out of the side window as the car slowed down and breathed a deep sigh of relief. It wasn't the lane, after all.

"There, Barbara,—we just passed the cross-road you used to take when you went to school. Remember it?"

"Bennie went to school there too," she said, starting the sentence slowly and ending it quickly, ominously on a rising note. The nurse laid a hand on her arm and murmured: "Now, now, Mrs. Jaggard!"

"When he was a little boy," went on Barbara, steadily.

"That's so," muttered Rufus. "I'd forgotten that."

Presently they turned into the lane, the headlights describing a curious, revolving sweep of the snow-covered hedge as they rounded the corner.

"I've never been inside this lane before," said Barbara, suddenly straightening up.

If he heard her he gave no sign. He was bending over, needlessly and clumsily tucking the laprobe closer about Barbara's feet.

"Thank heaven, it wasn't snowing that night," said she, so low that the words were barely audible.

He heard and he knew what she meant. He kept his head down. It was just about here that he and Bennie Jaggard met on that dark September night.

"He's hungry, poor lambie," said the nurse, as Benjamin the Third began to squawl lustily.

"We'll soon be there," mumbled Rufus.

"Yes," said Barbara, catching sight of lighted windows on ahead; "we'll soon be there, baby."

All her life she had looked up from the lowland at these high windows gleaming through gaps in the stockade of black, pointed cedars, and all her life she had wondered what it was like on the inside of that forlorn, friendless looking house of the Jaggards. When she was small she had thought of old Benjamin as the ogre in a fairy tale and she had regarded his little grandson as very brave to live up there in the same house with him. And now she was about to enter that house, she was about to go in where the lights were that always had excited her imagination, where all of the Jaggards had lain in death.

She was conscious of shivering, she wanted terribly to cry out:

"Take me back to father's! I can't go into that house. I don't belong there. I want to go home."

But she steeled herself. This was her house now. It belonged to her. Everything in it was hers, and everything about her as far as the eye could see save that little house down there among the oaks. And somehow as she stared, the lighted windows, misty through the veil of snow, seemed to take on a warm, cheerful, inviting glow. They were, after all, just like other lighted windows on a cold, dark night. There was warmth—and perhaps mystery beyond them.

The car stopped at the foot of the path leading up to the side porch. A man was engaged in sweeping the snow

off of the brick wall. He carefully leaned his broom against the front mud guard, paused to catch it as it started to slip down, and then opened the door.

"How are you, Dick," was Rufus's greeting. "Well, here we are "

"So I see," said Dick Carr, briefly. "Right smart of a snowstorm we're having. I guess the walk's fairly clear, so don't be afraid of getting your feet wet, ma'am. Been snowin' hard ever since seven o'clock. Evenin', Brink. Bad goin', eh?"

"Terrible," replied Brink Davis.

"Train on time?"

"Few minutes late."

"Thought she might be. Careful, ma'am. Take 'er easy. That's the stuff. Mis' Robbins is expectin' you. By gosh! Here he is! Steady, Miss,—don't drop him. Had bad luck enough with the Jaggards around here lately without—— Eh? What say, Mr. Playden?"

"Shut up!" whispered Rufus, over his shoulder.

Mrs. Robbins met them at the door. Barbara was leaning on Rufus's arm. She was very straight and erect, her gaze set rigidly before her, taking in the sitting-room which she was about to enter. The snap of burning logs in the fireplace greeted her ears, the pungent odor of smoke filled her nostrils. There was a reddish ingrain carpet on the floor. She stepped inside.

"How do you do, Mrs. Robbins," she said, holding out her gloved hand.

"Howdy do, Barbara Lee," responded the housekeeper, grasping the girl's hand. "Come right in, Miss,—poor lamb, he's crying. I hope he hasn't caught cold. Do you feed him yourself, Barbara, or does he have a bottle?"

A little while later, as she sat in front of the fire, her head resting wearily against the tidy on the back of the old arm-chair, her feet outstretched in a sort of limp surrender, Rufus came back into the room, buttoning his over-

coat nervously. The nurse had just gone off with the sleeping baby in charge of the Hinkle girl, who was showing her up to the room in which the child's father was born and where he had always slept.

"If I were you, Barbara," he began, "I'd have Miss Rivers sleep in the same room with you for a couple of nights. You're not very strong and it's been a—a hard trip for you. You ought to have company up here in this strange house for a while. Seems to me you ought not to be alone for a few nights at——"

She interrupted him, turning her head slightly to look up into his face. She noticed that it was ghastly white and that his dark eyes seemed startlingly brilliant on account of the contrast.

"Thanks, Rufus, but I shall probably have to sleep alone up in that room all the rest of my life. I might just as well begin getting used to it to-night."

CHAPTER SIX

WIPING OUT SHADOWS

THE first few days and nights at the house on the hill were unreal to Barbara. She could not adjust herself nor her thoughts to conditions which somehow rendered curiously void everything else that had gone before in her life.

The house itself, for instance,—it lacked *voices*. She had been brought up on voices: laughter, song, jest and, at times, squabbles. Here there was quiet,—not the stillness of solitude so much as of noise that had purpose for its origin. Whatever noise there was, whatever conversation,—and there was plenty of that, for Mrs. Robbins was a good soul and a chatty one,—it was never due to accident, exuberance or a boisterous disregard for the peace and comfort of others. No one ever shouted from the top of the stairs to some one in a remote part of the house below; no one whistled, as the boys at home had done, in spite of frequent admonitions; no one slammed doors or raced up and down stairs or knocked chairs over or shouted “hello” upon entering the house or held joyously public conversations over the telephone or sang in the bathroom or played the banjo or yelled to her to “get a move on, Barb,” or,—and this was something that brought a sharp crease between her eyebrows when she thought of it,—teased her about Rufus Playden. On the contrary, everything went along in an orderly, quietly energetic way, always to the achievement of an end, the accomplishment of a purpose.

Even when Lily Hinkle sang in the kitchen it was with a purpose.—to cheer herself up a bit and at the same time

keep her voice in trim for work in the choir on Sundays, although purpose at no time seemed strong enough to keep her on the key.

Barbara herself was calm, self-contained,—perhaps purposeful, though she did not know it. She showed a disposition to take hold of things in her new environment. It was not so much that she wanted to know what was expected of her as mistress of the house as it was to convince herself that all this belonged to her to do with as she pleased regardless of what Mrs. Robbins, who had been with Mrs. Absalom Jaggard as cook for years, thought about it. Something told her that before she was through with it she was going to turn Mrs. Robbins completely upside down and shatter every set and established practice that the good woman had observed ever since she came under the dominion of the Jaggards.

First of all, on being escorted upstairs that first night, she had calmly announced that she wouldn't sleep in the room if Absalom Jaggard had died in it. (She never spoke of him as Mister Jaggard. It was always as Absalom Jaggard.) On being assured that Mr. Absalom had died in the room across the hall,—where he could get the morning sun, poor soul, explained the housekeeper,—she said she was glad to see that the bathroom was connected with her room, and now would Mrs. Robbins please see that the door to the room across the hall was locked and kept locked until she gave orders to open it again.

Mrs. Robbins shrugged her shoulders. "Just as you like, Barbara Lee, just as you say, of course. But when it comes to that, somebody's died in nearly every room on this floor. Mrs. Absalom died in this very room. It was hers, you know. You can tell that by the way it's fixed up and furnished. Mr. Absalom wouldn't let anything be changed in it after she died. It's the brightest, airiest room in the house, and the biggest. Of course, you understand, it's been cleaned and dusted and aired every day, same as if

she was alive and—and inhabiting it. Old Mr. Benjamin Jaggard passed away in that room down the——”

“I don’t care about any of the other rooms, Mrs. Robbins,” interrupted Barbara, with a slow smile. “I just couldn’t bear to sleep in the room where my father’s enemy died. You knew, of course, that they were bitter enemies?”

The housekeeper stammered,—a most unusual thing for her: “Ye-yes. I—yes, I had heard something to that effect.” She waited a moment before adding, with a distinct trace of umbrage in her manner: “Well, when it comes to that, Barbara Lee, I guess your Ma and Mrs. Absalom wasn’t what you might call the best of friends. She died in this room.”

“I know,—but Bennie loved his mother, Mrs. Robbins. That makes quite a lot of difference, doesn’t it?”

“I—I suppose it does,” replied the perplexed housekeeper, and was further put out of countenance by Barbara’s announcement that she intended to have breakfast in bed. No one in Hurdleford ever had breakfast in bed unless so ordered by the doctor. One had to be mighty sick before anything like that happened.

“Ain’t—ain’t you feeling well, Barbara Lee?” asked Mrs. Robbins, solicitously.

“Oh, yes,—quite well,—considering. I’ve always wanted to have breakfast in bed, that’s all. Especially in winter. You may tell Lily Hinkle to bring up coffee and toast and a soft-boiled egg at eight o’clock. Three and a half minutes. I’ll have hot milk as well as cream with the coffee too.”

“At—at eight o’clock?” repeated Mrs. Robbins, not crediting her ears. They had breakfast at half-past six or seven o’clock as a rule in Absalom Jaggard’s house.

“Yes, please. There is a tray in the house, I suppose?”

“Oh, yes. We got one when Mr. Absalom was sick.”

Barbara frowned. “We will have to send to town for a new one to-morrow. Is there anything else she can use in place of a tray?”

Mrs. Robbins reflected. "She might use the bread board, if you don't mind."

"I don't in the least mind, Mrs. Robbins. Good night."

The housekeeper, who had a great deal more to say, was at a loss for words. She had hoped,—in fact she had counted on it,—that Barbara would have a lot to divulge about herself and her troubles and sorrows and about Bennie and the baby and her trip and "such like" before she went to bed. So in the face of this abrupt, smilingly curt dismissal she could only say:

"Well,—sleep tight," and close the door behind her as she stalked out into the hall. She instantly regretted having said anything so silly and frivolous as that. It sounded kittenish,—and this was no time for a woman who had been with the Jaggards for seventeen years to be kittenish.

By the end of the first week, however, Barbara was not only mistress of herself but of the house as well. She was smart enough to appeal to and in nearly all instances defer to the able but temporarily anxious Mrs. Robbins, who swelled considerably with pride and relief on discovering that "the poor, stricken lamb" was willing to lean on and be guided by her instead of having highfalutin ideas of her own about how to run a house.

The housekeeper had been,—and still was in a diminishing sort of way, for that matter,—uncertain as to what life in the City of New York had done for Barbara Wayne. She had feared that she might find her supercilious, self-opinionated and more or less intolerant of old conditions. On the contrary, Barbara was sweet and grateful. It was a great relief to Mrs. Robbins to find that New York had not spoiled her. Nevertheless, she sometimes wondered if Absalom Jaggard hadn't turned completely over in his grave because of the things his daughter-in-law had done,—notably the removal and subsequent destruction of all the family portraits that hung on the walls; the casting out of garments once worn by Absalom and his wife; the profligate

disposal of perfectly good shoes, boots, hats, to say nothing of personal trinkets, lifelong treasures and other things reminiscent of Jaggard occupation.

Photographs, taken at various stages in the growth of Bennie Jaggard, were collected from other rooms and arranged in the improvised nursery, but the supposedly magnificent crayon portraits, frames and all, of old Benjamin (holding a Bible in his lap), Absalom his son, and Caroline his daughter-in-law, all the work of a celebrated (?) artist whose agents scoured the state at one period in the praiseworthy and at the same time profitable effort to perpetuate in crayon the countenances of all its leading citizens, male and female (at so much per head, half-lengths extra). After one look at these ashen gray, staring atrocities, Barbara did not have to be reminded that Bennie's ancestors, (the few he had, to be sure), were utterly without pride. She was, however, very much surprised that Caroline, having been an Indianapolis "society lady" of undoubted standing (it will be recalled that her father was a sculptor), had consented to have herself "done" in this medium, and she might have felt that Bennie's mother was no nobler than the Jaggards themselves had not Mrs. Robbins explained that Absalom had the "crayon" done from a photograph some time after his wife's death. It seems that Caroline *was* above crayon portraits while she was alive but what could she do about it after she was dead?

Sempstresses from Miss O'Leary's dressmaking establishment came up to the house on the hill in response to a summons from the new mistress of the place, bringing patterns and fabrics, veils and bonnets, needles and thimbles and thread, and set to work making a presentable widow of Barbara. If Miss O'Leary expected her new patron to be lavish in her orders she was to be disappointed. Barbara was not used to wealth. She could not get over feeling that she was poor and had to watch the pennies. So she ordered only what she needed and, according to Miss

O'Leary, haggled quite a bit over prices. Still, thought the far-seeing dressmaker, the time was bound to come when Barbara Jaggard, who always had liked nice things and dressed herself more becomingly than any other girl in Hurdleford, would "blossom out" and spend money like water. Miss O'Leary's aim was to keep Mrs. Jaggard from going to Chicago or even New York City for her clothes. "Patronize Home Industry" was the slogan she ran at the top of her regular three-inch "single-column ad." in the *Express*, following it up in larger type with the announcement: "Models and Patterns Fresh from Paris."

Respecting the grief and also the possibilities of the young widow, storekeepers gladly obliged her by sending up to the house for inspection all manner of things, such as black beads, black bordered handkerchiefs, gloves, stockings, baby lamb neck-pieces, stationery and, with commendable thoughtfulness, a quart bottle of the very blackest ink.

Barbara sent for Rufus Playden.

"I am spending a lot of money, Rufus," she said. "That is, I am running up bills that will have to be paid some day. I should like you to tell me whether I can afford it."

"It won't be long before you'll have plenty of money, Barbara. Why worry?"

"But I haven't got it now," she protested. "I don't like to spend money I haven't got, you see."

"I expect to have an order from court on Wednesday," he explained. "Day after to-morrow. A certain time has to elapse by law, you understand, before the estate can be closed and everything turned over to you. But there will be no difficulty in obtaining a—er—an advance, you might say. There can be no dispute over the will, you see. The court will see its way clear to allow you——"

"That's all I wanted to know," she interrupted. "I just wanted to be sure I was not getting too deeply into debt."

He hesitated. "I guess anybody in Hurdleford would

give you unlimited credit, Barbara. Most people here have a pretty fair idea of what Absalom Jaggard was worth. We're making an inventory now. For your information and comfort I will say that there is something like seventy thousand dollars in the bank that will be yours before long."

"That's a lot of money," said Barbara, drawing a deep breath.

"It comes in at the rate of a couple of thousand dollars or so a week, from mortgages, rents, dividends and so forth. It's piling up every day. I don't believe you need to worry about running up a few bills. People will be glad to wait for their money."

"But doesn't Absalom Jaggard's estate have to be settled before Bennie's will can be probated or whatever you call it?"

"Yes. But that is a very simple matter."

"Don't the special bequests have to be settled before anything else? I mean the money he left to the Church and to certain other beneficiaries?"

"There will be ample to cover all those things and a lot besides."

"Well," she began, after a moment's pause in which she eyed him thoughtfully, "I am leaving everything in your hands, Rufus. I don't seem to have anybody else in the world to turn to now."

"I will see you through, Barbara," he said, and she mistook the sudden lowering of his eyes for self-consciousness. He forced himself to look up but could not conceal the trace of bitterness that accompanied his reassuring smile. "You will not be feeling like this always. You are morbid and depressed and unhappy now, but—well, you'll find you have a great many friends, Barbara, and the time will come when I'll have to take a back seat."

She held out her hand to him. "It doesn't make me any happier to hear you say things like that, Rufus. My goodness, how cold your hand is! Hold them over the fire and

get them warm. I was awfully selfish to ask you to come up here in this freezing weather."

He released her hand and bent over the red, simmering logs in the fireplace.

"Looks as though we might have a white Christmas, after all," he mumbled.

The baby had begun to cry in the room upstairs.

"Christmas!" she echoed, with a slight shiver. "I never hated Christmas before,—but, God, how I hate it now."

"Poor Barbara!"

She came over and stood beside him, holding her hands out to the fire. For a long time she was silent. Then she said softly, a tender note in her voice:

"It will be baby's first Christmas. He's something, Rufus. I didn't have him last Christmas."

As he was leaving later on, he said:

"I wonder if you'd care to see Stella Davidson, Barbara. She asked me yesterday if I thought you'd like to have her come up and——"

"Is she still engaged to Tom?" she broke in.

"I think so. I'm not sure."

"Why does she want to see me?"

"You were great friends. She cares a lot for you."

She stared down into the fire for many seconds before speaking.

"The baby is crying, Rufus. If you will excuse me, I'll go up to him. Thank you so much for coming."

She left the room without another word. She did not even say good-by to him, and yet he knew she was not coming down again.

Christmas came and January was well along before Barbara ventured forth into what might be called the world. The snow had disappeared and the roads were in fairly good condition, so she had Dick Carr drive her to Radley in the dilapidated old Jaggard car, accompanied by Mrs. Robbins. She went over to see about a tombstone for

Bennie's grave. Much to Mrs. Robbins's surprise, she ordered a simple granite shaft, not more than six feet tall, entirely without ornamentation or "motto," (the housekeeper referred to such lines as "Asleep With Jesus," "God's Will Be Done," "Gone but not Forgotten" when she spoke of "mottoes"), and, after choosing the style of "type" in which she desired her husband's name and age to be carved, left all other details to Mr. Manton, "Radley's Best-Known and Only Dealer in Tombstones."

Mr. Manton, who had confidently expected an order for a most expensive shaft and was disappointed when young Mrs. Jaggard showed such surprisingly good taste, to say nothing of an unexpected capacity for thrift, was decent enough however to observe to his bookkeeper after his customer had departed:

"She's the purtiest young widow I've laid eyes on in thirty years, and I've laid eyes on a lot of 'em in that time, let me tell you. I guess I've seen every fresh widow in this county since 1880 or thereabouts and this one's got 'em all skinned to death."

"Well, I guess she won't be a widow long," sniffed the bookkeeper, paying Barbara a great compliment without intending to do so.

"You bet she won't," agreed Mr. Manton, warmly. "Not with all her money and good looks. They say she won't speak to her brothers."

"She'd ought to be grateful to them," said the bookkeeper, fingering the tiny diamond ring she had been wearing on her third finger for seven years. "She'd be as poor as me or Job's turkey if it wasn't for her brothers."

Mr. Manton stroked his beard thoughtfully. "I wonder if she knows I was on the jury that tried 'em."

Barbara deliberately had turned her head as the car passed the Wayne farmhouse. Her eyes were hard and she gazed fixedly but unseeingly across the fallow stretch of Jaggard land sweeping down to the road that separated it

from her father's farm. She heard the dogs bark at the car as it passed, coming and going. They were not friendly barks.

Not since the day of her arrival had she seen Shelby Wayne. He had called her up on the telephone several times to inquire about her health and how things were going, but that was as near as he came to disregarding the oath he had taken never to enter the Jaggard house. On more than one occasion she had seen her brothers drive up the hill and once she had purposely remained on the side porch to watch them as they snowballed each other like schoolboys for five or ten minutes in the barnlot. Their antics brought no smile to her set lips.

All Hurdleford knew that neither Shelby Wayne nor the boys had gone near Barbara, not even at Christmas time. Dick Carr and the Hinkel girl brought authentic reports to barbershop, bar and Sunday school. Hurdleford wondered how long it would last.

As they turned into the lane on their return from Radley, Barbara suddenly leaned forward and asked Dick to stop the car as near as possible to the spot where he had found Bennie's body. She got out and directed him to drive on; she would follow on foot. For a few minutes she stood there at the edge of the thawing roadside, her head bent as if in prayer, her gaze fixed on the soggy, lifeless grass where her husband had lain.

"This is where his journey ended," she said, speaking aloud to herself through stiff lips. "I sent him to this. Poor Bennie! You haven't much to thank the Waynes for,—any of us. I might just as well have begged George and Tom to kill you." She lifted her head and actually glared down the hill at the house in the grove of winter-stripped oaks. "But, curse them, they didn't give you a chance to fight back. That was their real crime. They shot you,—one of them shot you,—without giving you a chance to say that I *wished* you to lie about me."

Before going to the house she made her way down the slope to the little burying-ground. She had been there before, when the ground was covered with snow. On Christmas day she had gone down to place a wreath of holly on Bennie's grave. Now she stood beside the barren little mound of frozen, unsodded earth and looked about her with dry, brooding eyes. There were four other graves in the little plot, three of them with cold, ugly monuments at their heads. No stone had been put up for Absalom Jaggard. She had just ordered one for Bennie. Again she spoke aloud as to these dead Jaggards.

"I suppose I will have to lie here with you when my time comes. Not by the will of God but by the will of Absalom Jaggard. And my boy too. I am a Jaggard now. A low-down Jaggard. You've left room here for me, I see. But I guess you never counted on having a Wayne here with you, did you, Jaggards?"

She found herself frowning at the mound beneath which Absalom Jaggard was lying. The hard light came back into her eyes.

"People will expect me to put up a tombstone for you, Absalom Jaggard. You neglected to mention anything in your will about a monument. 'My just debts and funeral expenses,' that was all you specified. Well, for your son's sake I'll give you a decent tombstone. He would have done it with your money. I'll do as much for you with his money, but I hate you just the same. If you had treated him as a good father should, he wouldn't be dead to-day. Yes, I'll give you a tombstone, Absalom Jaggard."

Upon her return to the house she was informed by Lily Hinkle that Mrs. Doctor Higgs and Mrs. Stidham had called to see her that afternoon.

"They said they'd come again," said Lily.

Barbara stopped short in the act of unbuttoning her glove.

"Did they say when?"

"Next week some time."

"Oh, that's all right," said her mistress and resumed the unbuttoning process.

She had received no visitors up to this time, although a number of women had called to offer their sympathy and to condole with her if permitted. They resented Barbara's unaccountable reluctance to be properly comforted. They had never heard of a bereaved wife,—or husband, for that matter,—who didn't in a measure relish being "made over" by kind and uplifting friends. Barbara's attitude surprised and hurt them. Aside from Dr. Higgs, who had been summoned twice to see the baby, no one had seen her except her lawyer, Rufus Playden. Hurdleford ladies, including the doctor's wife, had small satisfaction out of their efforts to pump these professional advisors.

"I told 'em they'd better telephone first," said Lily, brightly.

"Fine," said Barbara, and that was all.

She liked Mrs. Higgs. The doctor had told her that his wife had been nice to Bennie on the day of his return. She would see her when she called again. But not the others,—for a while, at least. Mrs. Higgs was the wife of a physician. She wouldn't be long-faced, she wouldn't look solemn and perhaps snifle, she wouldn't glance obliquely down her nose and speak in hushed tones. Barbara was rather sorry she missed her that afternoon. She wanted her to see the baby and cuddle him and make a fuss over him,—he was such a fine, sturdy, pink, little darling.

Eva Joslin had tramped all the way up from town one cold, windy afternoon. There was a wistful but dogged look in her eyes as she waited in the sitting-room while the Hinkle girl went upstairs to ask Barbara if she would see her. The principal witness in defense of the Wayne boys went away without seeing Bennie Jaggard's widow. It had taken Eva several weeks to screw up the courage to visit Barbara for the purpose of convincing her that she actually

had heard Bennie make those awful statements and had not made them up herself out of whole cloth.

"You tell Barbara that it was I and nobody else who saved her brothers' lives," she had urged as the Hinkle girl started to go upstairs, looking dubious after her failure to make the old nurse understand that Mrs. Jaggard wasn't seeing anybody, not even the preacher.

And Barbara had said to the Hinkle girl: "You go back and tell Eva Joslin that I prefer to let my brothers thank her for that."

Along toward the end of February Miss Rivers returned to her home in the east. She was replaced by a youngish Canadian nurse from Chicago, a Miss Remster, who did not mind wearing a uniform and whose references were of the best. She had spent several years in one of the maternity hospitals. A professional friend of Dr. Higgs's recommended her, announcing at the outset that she was "high-priced." Barbara took her on trial. Miss Remster had not been in the house three days before everybody in Hurdleford knew that she was receiving one hundred dollars a month—and uniforms. Hurdleford matrons were aghast. Twenty-five dollars a month was considered high pay, even for those who were able to indulge in the luxury of nursemaids.

The crowning sensation, however, followed close upon the advent of the "stylish" Miss Remster. Well supplied with funds through the activities of Playden & Crouse and no longer apprehensive about the future, Barbara set out to completely rehabilitate the house on the hill. Carpenters, masons, plumbers and painters appeared in that order and for weeks applied themselves strenuously to the task of carrying out her plans for a transformation so drastic that by the time Spring was beginning to put on its yearly finery the shabbiness that had satisfied the Jaggards for so many years was a thing of the past and in its stead stood forth for all to behold a spotless white building with a red roof,

tall red chimneys, covered verandahs, and the first signs of a terrace, an extensive lawn, a pergola and macadam driveways.

Barns, sheds and outhouses, repaired and repainted, formed a group of buildings that caused every farmer in the county to wonder why he had put off painting his own place for so many years,—and to set feverishly to work following Barbara's example.

Mrs. Higgs and a few other ladies who had by this time succeeded in breaking through the wall of young Mrs. Jaggard's highly commendable privacy (it had been insufferable rather than commendable up to the time she graciously let down the bars) were authority for the statement that she had performed wonders on the inside of the old house.

But even they were unprepared for what happened after the painters and carpenters and paper-hangers were through. A second-hand dealer from Radley came over with trucks and drays and carted off,—at a bargain,—every article of furniture in the house, including carpets, curtains, hangings, china, glassware, pictures,—everything, in fact, that had been left there by the Jaggards.

Barbara took up her abode at the Hoffman House while this process of stripping was going on. The Jaggard things were barely out of the house when other trucks and drays appeared on the hilltop loaded down with substitutes of a vastly different type and quality from the big store of Holmes & Jenkins in Radley. From bottom to top, from kitchen to garret, from front door to back, the house was entirely refurnished. Not a stick nor a stitch of Jaggard belongings was overlooked in the purification. As Mrs. Higgs said, after going over the place with a figurative fine-tooth comb, there wasn't so much as a toothpick left behind that had once been the property of a Jaggard.

Hurdleford merchants profited by this wholesale "clean up." They supplied the stoves and the kitchen range, the kitchen utensils, a certain amount of china, cutlery and

glassware, and all of the cheaper articles. But the curtains and carpets, the linen, the best china and glassware, table covers, lamps and shades, and all of the furniture came from Holmes & Jenkins. Even Bennie's room was dismantled and its contents carted away to be sold as junk. Nothing was retained save the dozen or more photographs of Bennie himself and certain of his intimate boyhood possessions together with articles they had purchased together in fitting up their little New York home. As for the things that had belonged to his mother,—her bedroom was daintily, tastefully and quite expensively furnished,—not a trace of them remained.

Every visible sign of Jaggard occupancy was, in the strictest sense, wiped out. Things that had been in the possession of Bennie's father and mother and his grandfather before them were swept out as if with a broom that found every crevice into which even the tiniest object might have slipped. Chromos, engravings and "mottoes" were replaced on the walls by sprightly examples of Bennie's ambition: sketches and paintings of nude young women reclining on couches, or preparing for the bath, or feeding the canary, or drying their shapely figures after a dip in the Bronx River in broad daylight, or wading carelessly in shimmering pools with nothing between them and the eyes of all creation except atmosphere; water-color landscapes and seascapes of startling hues and questionable talent; rough studies of heads of men and women of all ages and conditions; and several promising things done by Bennie's fellow-students and friends, including a decidedly impressionistic portrait of herself dashed off in an agitated hour by a young Russian who was enthusiastically looked upon as a "humdinger."

The good and at least mentally virtuous ladies of Hurdleford were shocked but silent in the presence of an art that left no room for discussion. It was the consensus of

opinion, however, that Bennie Jaggard hadn't died any too soon, if that was what he was coming to.

Barbara came face to face with Stella Davidson as she left the Hoffman House on the afternoon of her return to the house on the hill. Her father was with her. He had visited her almost daily during her fortnight's stay in the hotel. He was worried over the way his daughter was spending money.

"I know you can afford it, Barbara Lee, but it seems to me you're sort of—well, you might almost say throwing it away," he was saying as he watched her putting the last things into her bag. "God knows I'm not a tightwad or anything like that and I certainly never brought you children up to be careful about money, but——"

"Don't you worry about me, father," she interrupted, smilingly. "I've got to live in that house for a long, long time, I suppose, but it won't seem so long if I clear out all the Jaggard ghosts. I couldn't look at a chair in that house without having a vision of old Benjamin or Absalom Jaggard sitting in it,—and as for beds, good heavens, father, just think of what was in them for years! Nothing but Jag-gards. I squirm every time I think of them."

Shelby Wayne frowned darkly. His usually soft, melodious voice was curiously harsh as he retorted:

"You mustn't forget that you married a Jaggard and slept in the same bed with him, my girl."

"I'm not forgetting it," said she, after a moment, and then turned her head. Her chin quivered slightly and an instant later became firm and rigid. Into her beautiful eyes stole the cold, hard light. "And you must not forget it, either, father," she went on, facing him squarely.

"I won't forget myself again," said he, paling.

"You promised, you know."

"Just the same, I wouldn't complain about Jaggard beds, if I were you. Not after the way you made your own."

"You and I must not quarrel, father."

He eyed her thoughtfully. "You haven't been doing that house over and clearing everything out of it in the hope that I'll put foot inside of it, have you?"

She gave him a slow, queer smile. "No, indeed. Don't get such an idea as that into your head. I suppose I am the only Wayne who will ever put foot inside that house."

"There never was a Jaggard inside my house, or in my father's house or my grandfather's house, Barbara," said he significantly.

Her smile remained; it was as if her lips were carved out of smooth red stone. But there was a shadow of pain, a flicker of despair in her eyes.

"I shall bring my son up with that in mind, father," she said quietly.

"Your son is different," he made haste to say. "He is part Wayne. My heart and my house will always be open to him."

"I forgot," she said, her lip curling. "One of his grandfathers is a Wayne,—and one of his great-grandfathers and one of his great-great-grandfathers, and so on back to the Wayne who knew Sir Walter Raleigh."

"You might do well to bring him up to remember that," said Shelby Wayne, and suddenly put his arm around his daughter's shoulders.

She was silent for a moment. Then brightly: "What awful snobs we are, aren't we, dad? Come along now. Let's go down. I think you've got a fresh shock in store." She kissed him swiftly.

"That didn't shock me," he said, his face lighting up.

"Oh, mercy, it's lots worse than that."

She had pushed a call button three times. A boy appeared at that juncture with ice water.

"I wish you would carry these things down to the car, Charlie. What are you doing with that pitcher of ice water?"

"You rung three times, Mrs. Jaggard. You'd ought to have pushed it only twice if you wanted me without the ice water."

"I'm so excited," explained Barbara. "Excuse me, Charlie."

"That's all right," said Charlie magnanimously.

He followed downstairs with the bags. The nurse and the baby were waiting in the office. A number of men who had no particular business in the lobby of the Hoffman House at that time got up hastily from their seats and bowed to Barbara. Some of them took off their hats.

It was a bright, crisp Spring day. A little group of men and boys were gathered about a shining, brand-new automobile standing at the curb in front of the hotel. They drew back as Barbara appeared, making way for her. Brink Davis, who had been lecturing on the fine points of the car,—and they were the finest points conceivable,—cut short his discourse, proudly touched the peak of his cap and, addressing himself to Barbara, announced:

"Well, here she is, slick as a whistle and fit for a queen. Step right in, *Madam*, and—er—and say where."

Shelby Wayne stopped short on the hotel steps. He laid a heavy hand on Barbara's arm, checking her progress. His ruddy face had gone white.

"Is—is that yours, Barbara?" he demanded, his voice low and thick.

"Yes. Isn't it a beauty?"

"You—you bought a new car?" The words came with difficulty.

"The other one was falling to pieces." Curiously enough, she was frightened.

"You got it of Brink Davis?"

"Yes. It came this morning from Indianapolis."

Her father's hand fell away. His voice shook a little when he next spoke.

"All right, Barbara,—all right. It's a nice car. It's

the finest car in town. You will excuse me, however, if I am so ill-mannered as not to hand you into it, my dear." Nevertheless, he lifted his hat in his most courtly manner as he turned and reëntered the hotel.

Barbara's tall, black figure swayed for an instant. Then she walked swiftly down the steps, her head erect, her gaze fixed rigidly, unseeingly upon the gray interior of the car as revealed through the door Brink Davis was holding open.

She was halfway across the sidewalk before she was aware of the presence of the girl who had stopped short to let her pass. She slackened her pace, haltingly, hesitatingly. There was something actually shy and wistful in her manner as she held out her hands to Stella Davidson.

"Oh, Stella,—Stella dear!" she cried, a little hysterically. "I have wanted to see you so much. But I just couldn't, Stella. I couldn't stand seeing my old friends. Up to now, I mean. Won't you get in with me and—and come up to my house for a little while? Just for a little while. I want to talk to you."

Stella Davidson had been her closest friend in those other days. Never had she wanted this staunch, lovable girl's friendship as at this very moment. But Stella, even as she held her hands and looked up into the dark eyes, shook her head slowly.

"Some other time perhaps, Barbara, but not now," she said, unsteadily. "I am going to marry Tom, you know."

Barbara had not expected this. "But—but you wanted to come and see me a little while ago, Stella. You asked Rufus if he thought I'd——"

"Yes,—that was when I wanted to talk with you, Barbara," broke in the other girl, lifting her chin.

"About—Tom?"

"About *all* of us."

Barbara was silent for a moment, searching Stella's brown eyes for something that baffled her, something she could not grasp. She had released the other's hands.

"Then you will not come with me now?"

The hangers-on had drifted away. Brink Davis was busily employed in arranging the laprobe about Miss Remster, who had entered the car with the baby.

Stella glanced over her shoulder before replying. Her eyes were clouded.

"You are not fair to George and Tom, Barbara," she said levelly.

"Oh, I'm not? One of them killed my——" She shut her lips tightly.

Stella waited for a moment or two and then said: "One of them may have killed the man who said he was not your husband. Don't forget that, Barbara."

"I loved my husband, Stella."

"And they loved their sister."

"Good-by, Stella. I—I wanted you to come."

"Good-by. You won't mind if I tell you how sorry I am for—for everything, Barbara?"

"It's a good thing you said for everything. I should have hated you if you had said you were sorry for me," said the other, almost fiercely.

As she stepped into the car, old Ike Moses drove up to the curb behind Shelby Wayne's high-stepping thoroughbreds. Catching sight of Barbara, he struggled halfway up from the seat, bowed jerkily, and beamed, and called out in his quavering voice:

"Evenin', Miss Barbara Lee. Seen anything of yo' pa?"

CHAPTER SEVEN

NOT ONE OF THE IMMEDIATE FAMILY

THE months rolled by. A busy Spring, a promising Summer and a bountiful Fall came along in swift succession, heaping their riches in the lap of plenty. The Jaggard farms and flocks gave all they could to the Wayne who from childhood had despised them. She was now in full possession. If other people were surprised by what was generally acknowledged to be an amazing capacity for management, Barbara herself was not. She had a curious, fatalistic confidence in herself. At the outset she had said to herself,—rather cryptically perhaps: "I have everything to gain and nothing to lose," and with this sententious moral as a spur she had put her mind and heart into an undertaking that certainly would have staggered a much older and far more redoubtable Wayne.

On one point she was determined: she would live as a Wayne and not as the Jaggards had lived. They had denied themselves in order that they might become rich; she would have the best of everything in order that she might never allow herself to feel poor. And when she looked about her and saw what the Jaggards had lost in two lifetimes solely because they were rich, she was more determined than ever to see to it that while they may have lived in vain they did not die in vain.

As a matter of fact, she knew down in her heart that she would have faltered and no doubt made a complete mess of everything had she lacked the advice and the encouragement of Rufus Playden. She never was to forget his words when she despaired at the outset and was overwhelmed by the vastness of the undertaking ahead of her.

"All you have to do, Barbara," he had said, "is to let well enough alone. Don't try to improve upon something that is already perfect. Don't consider yourself wiser or abler than old man Jaggard. You've got good, honest men working for you. They know a lot more than you do at present. Just let things slide along in the old groove. You may call it a rut, if you like, but just the same it will pay you to stick to it. There isn't a dollar of indebtedness against this estate. Act wise but don't fool yourself into thinking you are wise. Because you're not. In time you'll get the hang of things and they won't look so forbidding. Keep your head on your shoulders and your feet on the ground and you can't go wrong. The way has been nicely paved for you. The Jaggards dealt in dirt and they made it pay. They left nearly three thousand acres of the finest dirt in the world behind them. All you've got to do is to just simply let the Jaggard dirt take care of itself and it will take care of you."

There was the planting and the plowing of far-reaching acres; the cultivation and the harvest of vast crops; the hauling and the disposal of carload after carload of grain. For two long generations all this had been taken care of by shrewd, hard-fisted Jaggards. It was not a woman's work. She realized this and yet was not afraid. She sent for John Howard shortly after her arrival at the house on the hill. Howard was a level-headed, hard-working farmer considerably past middle age who for nearly twenty years had been Absalom Jaggard's right-hand man. He managed the rich three-hundred-acre farm known as the "Sullivan place," several miles farther down the road in the direction of Radley. Benjamin the First had come into possession of this farm in the late seventies when Barry Sullivan's misfortunes as a drover put him into bankruptcy. Howard ran the farm on a percentage basis; he was the only one of Jaggard's men who enjoyed this privilege. The others were paid by the month. The pay

was liberal enough, for the Jaggards were good business men, and each of them was required to pay a small annual rental for the house in which he lived.

Barbara made John Howard general manager of all her farms. He was to receive a salary of six thousand dollars a year; his two sons were to conduct the "Sullivan place" under the old Absalom Jaggard arrangement. She made it clear to John Howard that any separate agreement he saw fit to make with his sons in regard to profits was his own look-out, not hers. All she asked for was loyalty. John Howard said he guessed he could promise that.

Rufus Playden was her right-hand man, however. John Howard may have believed himself to be, but he was not. She thanked her lucky stars,—and God, too, when she happened to think of it,—that she had Rufus Playden behind her. She felt secure. She could depend on him. Good old Rufus!

She was not insensible to the fact that he still loved her. She would have been a fool not to have seen through him. Yes, he was the same old Rufus. He hadn't changed, he never would change, poor fellow. Sometimes, however, she was aware of a slight trace of scorn mixed in with the pity she felt for him. She would have thought more of him, she said to herself, if he had sneered at her and told her to go to the devil. That is what she would have done,—or at least that is what she believed she would have done,—if a man had played such a trick on her. Nevertheless, she consoled herself with the thought that she had never actually given Rufus any definite reason for believing that she intended to marry him. On the other hand, she *had* allowed him to go on thinking that he was the only man. Up to the very day of her flight she had been what people respectfully termed "his girl." But she had never made any promises, she had never told him that she loved him; she had,—to be quite honest,—used him as a sort of blind in the last few weeks of her wild affair with Bennie. She

was a little ashamed of that, and always had been. He had not deserved that sort of treatment. He was too fine for that, too sensitive, too honorable.

And now, as their renewed intimacy grew stronger and she realized the extent of his devotion, she was sorrier for him than she cared to admit, even to herself. He was wasting his love on her. Her own love was buried out there on the hillside in Bennie Jaggard's dead heart. Never for a single instant did she so much as think of digging it up in order that it might one day be shared with Rufus.

But there were times when she was troubled. She had been unfair to Rufus once,—why should she go on being unfair to him by allowing him to serve her without compensation? What recompense could he find in the fees she paid in cash to Playden & Crouse for services rendered? And the joke of it was, as junior partner he received only a small part of the emolument going to the firm. The bulk of it went to Judge Playden and Sam Crouse. It seemed like mockery to her,—and yet there was nothing she could do about it.

And there was unconscious mockery in the show he made of being fond of Bennie Jaggard's child. She knew that down in his heart he hated the baby, although by neither word nor sign did he betray the secret. Her eyes grew hard and sullen sometimes when she saw him playing with the wriggling, laughing child as it beamed up at him from the crib, for she knew that he was saying to himself:

“You poor little devil! You're nothing but a low-down Jaggard, after all.”

She adored her child. Benjamin the Third, now a fat, smiling baby nearing the end of his first year, was an object not only of affection but of concern to her. This concern had to do with the remarkable and ever-increasing likeness he bore to an ancient daguerreotype of Absalom Jaggard taken when he was an infant. At times this resemblance was startling. He did not in the least look like his father.

Bennie "took after" his mother. One could see that even in the faded "cabinets" made by the local photographer when he was very small. He was his mother's son, there could be no doubt about that. But this son of his, this black-eyed baby with the flattish nose and the low forehead, was not like his father nor was he like his mother. He was a Jaggard to the core. There was not the faintest trace of Wayne in his features.

Sometimes Barbara tried to picture him as he would be at twenty and always her lips tightened and her eyes grew dark with pain. He would not be like his father, brown-eyed, fine-featured and handsome. She could see him only as a lean, ungainly youth with high cheek bones, thin lips, long nose, sunken eyes set too close together and a forehead on which the hair grew low and thick and coarse. And when he was an old man he would look like Absalom Jaggard and old Benjamin before him. Why couldn't he have been like Bennie? She was very bitter about it. It wasn't fair. She frequently studied her own face in the mirror; and she would gaze fixedly, longingly at Bennie's familiar features in the photograph on her dressing-table, only to ask God why this child could not have been like one of them. Instead of that, he would grow up to be a Jaggard. It always hurt her when people said that he was the "living image" of Absalom Jaggard. Once she spoke to her father about it, anxiously yet defiantly.

"Do you think he looks like me, dad?"

Shelby fell into the trap. "Not a bit," said he. "And he doesn't look like his grandmother, either," he went on, sententiously. They were on the friendliest of terms now, but he came close to spoiling everything when he added, a note of pity or it may have been chagrin in his voice,—she couldn't tell which: "It's a shame he doesn't take after his mother, Barbara, the same as his father did."

"Then you think he looks like,—like his grandfather?" She wanted to hear him say it and have it over with.

"If you mean Absalom Jaggard,—yes. It's pretty hard to stamp out a breed, my child. It crops out somehow, even after five or ten generations have passed."

She hesitated for a moment and then said harshly: "Like nigger blood, eh?"

He started. He had been thinking that very thing. "My grandfather used to say that I was exactly like his grandfather, and that's going back quite a ways, my dear. It crops out in the Waynes, so there's no reason why it shouldn't do the same with the Jaggards. It's pretty hard to wipe out a strain or a trait. Nigger blood isn't the only thing that is sure to come to the surface sooner or later."

One day late in October she read in the society column of the *Express* the announcement of the approaching marriage of Stella Davidson and Thomas Wayne. It was to take place at the home of the bride's parents on the evening of November the fifteenth, and was to be a very quiet affair. Only the immediate relatives of the young people were to be present. The ceremony was to be performed by a young Presbyterian minister from Radley, the Rev. John Lewis Borum.

Her heart contracted sharply and there was a flicker of pain in her eyes. But it was gone in an instant and she smiled a trifle sardonically. "Only the immediate relatives!"

A long time afterward, far in the night,—it suddenly struck her as queer that the bride's father was not going to marry them. In a flash her active, questing mind jumped to this conclusion, and she did not go to sleep at all that night: Stella's father would not pronounce the words that made his daughter the wife of a man who had slain another. The Rev. Mr. Davidson *knew*. Tom must have confessed to him as to a priest. And Stella knew. Tom was not allowing her to take this step in the dark. Strangely her heart warmed toward Stella. She was not afraid to take Tom, she was not afraid to bear the children of a murderer. The

tears that had flooded Barbara's eyes without her knowledge dried on her cheeks in the darkness; and where for a little while there had been a desperate longing to hold Stella Davidson in her arms there was now a cold resentment against this girl who would not be robbed of the thing she loved. There was bitterness and gall in the thought that Stella's children would be Waynes and that they would look down upon this Jaggard child whose father had been killed by theirs.

And yet she found no solace in the news that reached her ears a day or two later. Kate Smith had thrown George over and was going to marry beneath her,—if that were possible, and Barbara doubted it:—a chap named Schwartz whose father conducted a butcher shop and spoke with an accent and whose mother used to wear a shawl over her head even in hot weather, notwithstanding which the son had gloriously risen above his environment to become a dentist with an ample and promising practice and was looked upon as one of the leading young men of Hurdleford. She despised Kate Smith for turning against George Wayne. It never entered her head to analyze the anomalous situation in which she found herself so far as the two girls were concerned. She hated Stella for marrying Tom but she felt even more bitter toward Kate for not doing the same by George.

It was a long time before she began to wonder whether Stella was as brave and as loyal as she had credited her with being on that dark night when she wanted to hold her in her arms. Perhaps, after all, it was George.

She had come to realize long before this that Hurdleford sided with her brothers. More than that, she was subtly alive to the fact that she, as good a Wayne as either of them, had inherited to an unmistakable degree the hostility that Hurdleford always felt toward the Jaggards. Surely it was being borne in upon her,—perhaps by way of her own sensitiveness,—that people now thought of her only as a Jag-

gard. They were friendly enough and courteous but there was no warmth in their manner; they no longer chaffed and "joshed" with her as in the old days. She remembered only too well how the townspeople used to call her Barbara. Now they called her Mrs. Jaggard. And she remembered also that no one ever had thought of speaking familiarly to any one of the Jaggards. In Stidham's Bookstore, where she had worked for awhile, the proprietor and clerks always addressed her as Mrs. Jaggard.

She had never known any one to jest with a Jaggard. Even as a little child she had noticed that people were not the same toward the Jaggards as they were to other acquaintances,—to her father, for instance, for whom everybody had a kindly smile, a glad wave of the hand or the cheeriest of shouts. There were bitter moments when she could not help feeling that people treated her as if she too were a Jaggard. At such times her eyes smouldered, her jaws were set and—yes, once she caught sight of herself in a mirror and found that her rigidly pursed lower lip protruded far beyond the upper. She was startled, horrified. Absalom Jaggard's lower lip always had stuck out just like that. She used to think it was natural to him. Now she knew that it wasn't.

Two days before the wedding she left for a week's stay in Chicago. On the platform at the railway station she came face to face with her brother Tom and Stella Davidson. They had been walking up and down and were directly in front of the door as she emerged. Tom Wayne stopped short in his tracks. For a few seconds,—it seemed ages to the agitated Stella,—brother and sister looked straight into one another's eyes. In his there was eager, hungry appeal; in hers, after the first flicker of surprise, a cold, absolutely unwavering stare, as if she were bent only on searching his mind for an answer to the question she mutely asked. She was aware of the sudden, involuntary movement of his hands as he started to hold them out to her; and she knew that

they remained partly extended for a moment or two before they dropped to his sides. But she gave no sign. The spell was broken by Stella Davidson.

"Tom!" she cried out softly. There were other people on the platform. Barbara did not shift her gaze. It remained fixed on Tom's eyes.

His face, which had gone white, suddenly flamed red with the rush of hot, angry blood. He whirled on his heel.

"All right, Stella," he said, thickly. "Sorry I forgot myself."

They walked swiftly toward the lower end of the platform where, exposed to the shrill November wind, they stood with their backs to Barbara. The latter watched them narrowly, intently. She had not moved. She was not the kind to slink away.

Stella was talking to Tom, her arm through his, hanging onto it tightly. Presently he hung his head, his shoulders were hunched up as if he were crying. Then to her amazement, Stella Davidson turned and came toward her, walking rapidly. The girl's chin was high and as she drew nearer, young Mrs. Jaggard could see that her usually soft and gentle eyes were flashing. They had not spoken to each other since that day in front of the Hoffman House. Stopping directly in front of the tall sister of Tom Wayne she said:

"I just want to tell you, Barbara, that even if you believe Tom Wayne killed Bennie Jaggard you ought to get down on your knees and thank him for it. I am going to marry Tom. I love him better than anything else in the world. But if he lied about me as your husband lied about you, I would kill him with my own hands."

Barbara stared at her, speechless for the moment. As the other turned to walk away, she managed to cry out:

"Wait!"

"Well? What is it?"

Barbara's throat tightened. "You may tell Tom that I

love him, Stella. That's all. If he will only come to me and say that he—that he did it, I will forgive him. I will put my arms around his neck and——” She lowered her head, her lips trembling.

Stella's response was a shake of the head, a queer little smile on her lips.

“He will never do that, Barbara Wayne.”

“My name is Jaggard,” said Barbara, lifting her head.

“Well,—mine will soon be Wayne. I will be proud of it.”

Without another word, she strode away.

Barbara flinched. Then her body stiffened and the hard gleam came back into her dark eyes, driving away the soft, appealing light that filled them for so brief a time. She heard some one snicker behind her, followed by a suppressed laugh or two, and knew that at least part of the brief little dialogue had been overheard. Her lip curled. She knew that the story, ungenerously magnified, would be all over town before night. She could almost hear Hurdleford chuckle as it listened to how Stella Davidson had “given Barbara Jaggard hail Columbia” on the station platform. A hot flush spread over her cheeks and brow. These people had heard her say “My name is Jaggard,” and they had heard Stella say “My name will soon be Wayne.” Nothing could have cut deeper into Barbara's pride than that. She realized for the first time perhaps how bitterly she hated the name of Jaggard.

As she turned to reënter the waiting-room, Rufus Playden came hurrying around the corner of the building. His anxious, distressed gaze fell upon her after a moment's search among those on the platform. Almost in the same glance he caught sight of Tom and Stella. He followed Barbara into the waiting-room.

“I just called up the house,” he began, rather breathlessly. “Mrs. Robbins said you were going to Chicago. I—when did you decide to go, Barbara?”

She met his eyes for a fleeting second or two, saw some-

thing in them that startled and disturbed her, and instantly looked away.

"Oh, I've been planning to go for a week or so," she replied, and knew that she was cruel.

"You have? You didn't say anything to me—I mean, it's quite a surprise. First I've heard of it."

"I'm sure I spoke to you about running up there to buy some pictures and hangings and—oh, a lot of that sort of stuff for the house. Heaven knows it needs something to brighten it up a bit."

He was silent for a moment, looking at her averted face.

"I see. How long will you be away, Barbara?"

"A week, perhaps. I don't know," she replied shortly.

"A week?"

"Maybe longer. The change will do me good. I'm—I'm sick of Hurdleford."

"I suppose you are," he said. "You must be. It's—it's not New York," he added, fatuously.

"God knows it's not New York," she said, forcing a smile. "It's the jumping-off place."

"Well, so is New York, for that matter. That's where one goes when he wants to jump across the Atlantic. Hardly the same thing, however."

"Hardly. When one jumps off in Hurdleford he lands in his own footprints,—and there he sticks."

"So I rushed down to the station before the train got in to see if—if you had anything you'd like me to attend to while you're away," he resumed as if nothing had been said after his first remark.

"I can't think of anything, Rufus."

He looked at his watch. His usually brilliant eyes were glazed.

"The train's late," he mumbled. He cleared his throat.

"Well, I'll call up the house every day to see if there's anything Mrs. Robbins wants or—you said about a week?"

"See here, Rufus," she said abruptly; "I'll tell you why

I'm going. It's because of the wedding. I don't want to be here. I'm not coming back till it's over. That's the long and the short of it."

His face brightened. "Oh, so that's the reason? Well, I—of course, you know best, Barbara. I don't suppose it would be—er—pleasant."

"Pleasant?" she cried, intensely. "I just simply couldn't stand it, that's all. I saw Tom out there a while ago. And Stella too. Never mind what happened. You'll hear about it soon enough. I—oh, I wish to God that train would hurry up. What do you suppose is the matter with it? The *Express* will be full of it. Everybody will be talking about it and wishing everybody happiness and good luck and—'Only the immediate relatives,' that's what it said. Well, I'm not a relative. Do you understand that? I'm not related to the Waynes. I'm a Jaggard, that's what I am. I'm a low-down Jaggard. If anybody asks you——"

"For heaven's sake, Barbara," he half-whispered, glancing about him. "Don't let people hear you going on like——"

"I don't give a damn if they do hear what I'm saying," she retorted, passionately but in lowered tones. Then she bit her lip to keep back the rush of words that surged up. He watched the sullen frown darken her eyes as the color faded from her hot cheeks.

"Oh, Barbara,—Barbara darling, I—I—— Forgive me, forgive me. I didn't mean to say that. I couldn't help it. I——" he was going on, first recklessly, then humbly, when she interrupted him.

"I know, Rufus. I know you couldn't help it. I'm sorry. I've known all the time." She was as suddenly full of pity as she had been of fury the moment before. Her eyes were great dark wells of compassion. "It's—it's hell, isn't it?"

At any other time he would have shrunk from the sound of the word coming from her lips, but now he merely drooped his head and muttered:

"Yes, it's hell."

"I'm sorry," she said, after a moment.

"I'm sorry," he repeated thickly. He pulled himself together with an effort. "Forget what I said, Barbara. It slipped out. I've never gotten over it, you see. But it doesn't matter now. I'm not asking for anything but your friendship. I'll try to deserve that. And that is more than I do deserve. Now, let's talk about something else. The wedding. I haven't told you, but Tom asked me a couple of weeks ago to be his best man."

She started. "What was that you said?"

"He asked me to stand up with him. I—I declined."

A few seconds passed. She was getting something through her puzzling brain.

"Isn't George going to be his best man? Why isn't George going to be Tom's best man?"

"There isn't going to be a best man at all," he said calmly.

"Tom said—well, I guess I'd better not tell you what he said."

"Tell me!" she commanded. "What is the trouble? Is there any reason why George refuses to stand up with him?"

"I suppose I've gone too far already, so I might as well continue." He looked about him. They were standing at a window and no one was near. "I don't know whether this will please you or not, but it shows how they feel,—both of them. Tom said that he and George had talked it over and had agreed that it was best not to make it a family affair,—that is, they couldn't bear the thought of two brothers standing up together, side by side in a ceremony like that when their sister was—well, sitting up there alone on the hill and—er—out of everything. They simply couldn't. It wasn't in them to do a thing like that. Tom said he couldn't bear the thought of him having everything and you having nothing, Barbara."

"Nothing?" she faltered, her lips falling apart. "Why,—why, good heavens, Rufus, haven't I got—everything?"

He shook his head. "I am only telling you what Tom said. That's the way they both feel about it. I've talked to George."

She turned away and stared out of the dirty window pane. Presently she spoke without looking at him.

"You couldn't have had the same reason for declining that George had, Rufus. You are not a member of the family. Why did you beg off? Was it because you thought it would be treacherous to me? You are my—my lawyer, you see."

"I didn't quite see how I could act as Tom's best man when everything is considered," he replied, after a moment's hesitation.

"In plain words, you refused because of me," she said, facing him.

"That is what I told Tom. He understands."

"Are you telling me the truth?"

He started. For a second or two fear gleamed in his eyes.

"I—— What do you mean by that, Barbara?"

"Stella Davidson is not afraid to stand up with him."

"Oh, come now! Do you mean to say you think I refused because he's been accused of—— What do you think I am? A dirty hypocrite?"

"Don't get excited, Rufus! My mind is in a whirl. It struck me as strange, that's all. You see, you were his lawyer before you were mine. For that matter, Playden & Crouse,—and that includes you,—are still the Wayne lawyers. You——"

"I see what you are driving at. You think your brothers may have confided in their attorneys and that we know more than we've ever told. Is that it?"

"Frankly,—yes."

He had the queer feeling of holding his breath when he put the next question. His lips felt stiff.

"Do you believe that I know who killed your husband?"

"You know that one of my brothers did it, don't you?"

"I don't know anything of the kind," said he, looking her straight in the eye.

"I believe you, Rufus. I don't believe you could tell a lie,—even if it was the honorable thing to do. Your eyes would betray you. That's the trouble with having honest eyes." She laughed a little. "You ought to train them how to lie, Rufus. Ah, here she comes."

The sound of a distant whistle reached their ears. People began picking up bundles and suitcases and moving along the platform. Rufus took up her suitcase and overnight bag from a seat just inside the door and waited for her to pass out ahead of him. She hung back.

"I'll wait till it comes to a stop," she explained, nervously. She looked past him down the platform. Tom and Stella were watching the train, now less than a quarter of a mile away.

"Are you taking a trunk, Barbara?"

"What?"

"Your trunk? Have you checked it?"

"My—ah, yes, my trunk. Yes, it's checked, thank you. See! There it is on the truck. The one with the white letters,—plain enough to be seen a mile away, it seems to me, 'B.J.' I left out the 'W,' do you see? The 'W' would stand for Wayne. Smart of me, wasn't it? Sparing the feelings of the 'immediate relatives,' and all that sort of thing. 'B.J.,' that's all. The same initials that old Benjamin Jaggard himself carried through life, although they say he couldn't write them till he was thirty years old. Funny, isn't it? I could write 'B. W.' when I was only three. And now I can't write it at all."

She was speaking jerkily, a little shrilly. He looked at her in perplexity. What could be the matter with her? Was she about to crack under the strain,—this strong-willed, indomitable creature whose courage and defiance had been a source of wonder to him?

The coaches came to a standstill. Even then she waited.

Passengers came down the steps of the cars, others mounted them. Two girls scuttled down the steps of the third Pullman and were greeted by Stella and Tom. There were kisses and embraces on the part of the girls. Tom had his back toward Barbara. She knew it was deliberate. Suddenly she dashed across the platform and hurried up the steps into the coach vestibule. From the top she turned to Rufus and called out:

"Just set them here on the steps, Rufus. The porter will take care of them. Thanks so much. Good-by. Who are those girls?"

He was following her into the car with the bags. Outside the conductor was shouting "All aboard!"

"Stella's cousins. From Louisville, I think. They were here last summer for a couple of weeks."

"Immediate relatives of the young couple," quoth she, with a shrug of her shoulders as she sat down in a seat near the door. "Hop off, Rufus. We're starting. For goodness' sake, be careful. Don't fall under the wheels." He was shaking hands with her. She smiled into his solemn eyes, but her smile was a little twisted. "You see, you're my best man now, Rufus."

"Good-by," he gulped and rushed to the vestibule. The train was in motion.

She looked out of the window and saw Stella and her cousins getting into an automobile. George Wayne was at the wheel. Tom was piling bags on the front seat beside him. They all appeared to be having a very jolly time. Barbara turned her eyes away. They fell upon Rufus Playden who was striding swiftly alongside the coach, his hat in his hand, his eyes upturned to her.

"I could change it to Playden to-morrow if I wanted to," she muttered, half aloud.

CHAPTER EIGHT

BARBARA RUNS AWAY AGAIN

RUFUS waited until the train disappeared in the cut that led to the river bridge. Then he walked slowly away, his head bent, his brow furrowed as with pain. Had he spoiled everything by that sudden, involuntary outburst? Could things go on between them as before now that she knew his secret? Wasn't she bound to feel a natural restraint that promised to grow, sooner or later, into vexation if not actually into a form of repugnance? And then what?

He felt himself turn cold and sick as he thought of what might transpire as the result of that brief unguarded moment. She would see less and less of him; she would not come to him for counsel and encouragement as she had been wont to do; she would be afraid of him and so there would be an end to everything.

Never as long as he lived would he forget the cold, unsmiling,—he was sure it was contemptuous,—stare with which she favored him from the car window. It had cut him to the quick, and it was still hurting. It was significant, too, that she had not waved her hand in response to his farewell gesture. So preoccupied was he that he failed to see the automobile that had pulled over to the curb and was slowing down, just ahead of him. Not until George Wayne called out for the second time did he raise his eyes from the ground.

"Want a lift, Rufe? Hop in. We're going past your office."

"No, thank you,—George," he replied, blinking a little. "I think I'll walk. Need the exercise."

Tom had thrown open the door to the tonneau. He was seated on one of the seats facing the three girls.

"Get in, Rufe. Here are some old friends of yours. You haven't forgotten Ella and Margaret Chester, have you?"

Rufus pulled himself together. The two young strangers,—very pretty girls and very smartly dressed,—were leaning forward and smiling. He shook hands with them.

"I should say not," he exclaimed, affecting an enthusiasm he did not feel. "Hello, Miss Bride-to-be,—how are you?"

"Oh, Rufus, what a gorgeous tea set," cried Stella. "I nearly lost my mind when we opened the box yesterday."

He flushed with embarrassment. "I wish I could have afforded one made of solid gold, Stella, and studded with emeralds. Green for tea, you know."

The color was stealing back into her face. He had not failed to notice the pallor that seemed to have settled upon her usually warm cheeks.

"I hate tea, Rufe," drawled Tom, with his pleasant grin. "But I'm going to drink it three times a day from now on. Yes, sir,—even if it kills me. Hop in." He lowered the seat at his side.

"I say, Rufe," broke in George; "you ought to have your overcoat on. It's pretty sharp."

For the first time Playden realized that he had dashed away from the office without his overcoat. He had not felt the cold till now; he had given no thought to anything except getting to the station before Barbara left. Suddenly he shivered.

"I—oh, I run out every once in a while without a coat," he stammered, and looked away quickly as he caught the queer little frown in George's eyes.

"Well, you'll get pneumonia if you don't look out, old man," said the older Wayne, as he too looked away.

"Climb in here," ordered Stella. "We'll put a robe around your shoulders. Your teeth are chattering."

She moved over to the seat alongside Tom and forced

Rufus, notwithstanding his protestations, to sit between the two strangers.

"Sit up close, girls," said Tom. "Give him a little of your Louisville warmth."

"Scorch him," said George, over his shoulder.

"Put this over your shoulders," said Tom, pulling a light laprobe off the rack behind him.

"Come off! I'm as warm as toast," exclaimed Rufus, gallantly spurning the robe.

"If I was not a preacher's daughter, Rufus, I'd advise you to take a good big drink of whisky when you get to the office. I know the Judge keeps a demijohn there, so don't look innocent."

"Goodness!" exclaimed one of the Chester girls. "We keep barrels of it in our house."

The distance to the offices of Playden & Crouse was short. They were no time at all in covering it. Rufus, on getting out of the car, took off his hat and stood for a few moments, saying good-by and thank you.

"Put on your hat, you chump," growled George.

"Lord, who do you think you are, George? My grandmother?" exclaimed Playden, scornfully. "Confound you, can't you see I'm only cooling off?"

"Well, you skoot upstairs and do what the preacher's daughter would have told you to do if she wasn't a preacher's daughter," said George.

Playden was conscious of the dark, brooding look in Tom Wayne's eyes. He had been aware of it all the way up from the station. The young man had said but little during the short trip. The three girls had done all of the talking. Still, at best, he was never loquacious. There was nothing unusual about his silence. And yet Rufus felt uncomfortable; it seemed to him that Barbara's brother had read his thoughts and was sorry for him.

Suddenly Tom leaned forward and held out his hand.

"And don't give up the ship," he said, meaningly. "Keep a stiff upper lip, old boy."

Not knowing at all what was in Tom's mind nor the construction Rufus put upon the flippant advice, Stella cried out:

"And then your teeth won't chatter."

"So long!" said Tom, giving Rufus's hand another mighty squeeze before releasing it. He was still looking deep into the other's eyes and there was a smile of encouragement in his own. There was a smile on George's lips too,—a friendly smile.

The car moved away and Rufus strode across the sidewalk to the entrance leading up to the offices. Inside the street-doors he stopped and leaned for a few seconds against the wall.

"He wants me to have her," he was saying to himself in a bewildered sort of way, his lips tight, his eyes fixed on the wall opposite. "That's what he meant. 'Don't give up the ship.' 'Stiff upper lip.' God Almighty! Both of them sitting there with their backs almost touching and wishing me good luck! And both of them believing the other did it! God Almighty! Wishing me good luck!"

Swayed by an impulse that for the moment overcame every other thought in his mind and which he was utterly powerless to resist, he dashed back to the sidewalk, flinging open the doors with a bang. In that one moment he came near the breaking point. If the Wayne boys had been within reach of his voice he would have cried out the truth to them; he would have set them straight with the world and with themselves; he would have placed his neck in the noose,—and all because the Waynes,—every last one of them,—trusted him and knew that he was their best friend! He had a mad—it seemed to him an almost hilarious—desire to show them that he *was* their best friend. But the car was out of sight. He ran a few steps toward the corner, stopping only when he realized that the chase was useless.

In another moment, he was shivering with the most acute trepidation over the close call he had had! God! He would never let go of himself like that again! Whirling, he scurried back into the little hallway, glancing fearfully over his shoulder as he let the doors slam behind him. People must have seen him and wondered what on earth was the matter with him. He had a dim notion that he had bumped into some one, almost knocking him over, as he burst out of the doorway,—it may have been a woman, for all he knew,—and, now that he thought of it, Mart Connolly, the Town Marshal, had stopped short in front of him, demanding genially:

“Gosh! Where’s the fire, Rufus?”

Several minutes passed before he entered the office upstairs. He had taken the time to get himself well in hand before venturing into the presence of his father and Sam Crouse. He was glad, however, to find them occupied with a client. His father gave him a sharp look as he passed through to the back office. Closing the door behind him he went quickly to the closet in which the Judge kept his famous demijohn of fine old bourbon. His hand was on the knob,—Judge Playden never locked his whisky up,—when he paused. The next moment he turned and walked away, his jaw set. Many seconds passed before he realized that he was again muttering aloud to himself,—as once before in that little hotel up in the Connecticut hills,—and this is what he was saying, almost fiercely:

“You coward! Be a man, damn you! Let it alone. Don’t be a fool. Keep a stiff upper lip! Ha! That’s a fine way to keep a stiff upper lip. What the devil’s the matter with me? God Almighty! If I give in now, after all these months, I’ll be a dirty, stinking drunkard in no time, and what would she think of me then? What would the boys think?” Here he caught himself up and ceased his muttering. Nevertheless his thoughts went on, unvoiced:

"George and Tom Wayne haven't touched a drop of liquor since that night and God knows they haven't as much reason to be afraid of the stuff as I have."

He sat down and feverishly began to run through the papers on his desk, trying to put his mind on the task he incontinently had dropped in order to rush off to the station. Presently he leaned back in his chair and allowed his thoughts to drift into the channel from which he was powerless to divert them, no matter how hard he tried. So the Wayne boys wanted him to have Barbara, did they? Or could he have misconstrued Tom's . . .

His father's entrance, a long time afterwards, brought him sharply out of the reverie into which he had fallen. He started as one awakened from a sound sleep. And a little later on, while Judge Playden was speaking, he hastily restored to his pocket the shell-capped lead pencil he had been twiddling in his fingers for—he did not know how long.

"—and you looked as if you were half-frozen," Judge Playden was saying as he closed the door and walked over to examine the oil stove that warmed the back room in lieu of steam or coal. "You ought not to go without an overcoat in weather like this, Rufus."

"I was in a hurry, father. I'll know better next time. It was pretty dog-goned cold."

"Are you warm now?"

"Perfectly."

"How about a snack of that whisky up there in the closet? May head off a cold."

"I'll take it if I think I need it,—but I'm all right, sir. Don't you worry about me," said Rufus brightly.

The Judge took a turn or two across the room before halting in front of his son.

"I ran across Shelby Wayne over in the Hoffman House this afternoon. Haven't seen him in quite a while. They

tell me he is drinking pretty heavily nowadays. He looks it. Have you noticed it, Rufus?"

"Mr. Wayne has always been a drinker but I don't believe any one could say that he ever took too much."

"They're saying it now," said the Judge, frowning. "I don't like it. This thing has got on his nerves. I can understand it, too. He is in a most grievous position. And, the worst of it is, there doesn't seem to be any way to straighten matters out. It will have to go on like this forever, I suppose, unless Barbara weakens. The boys can't do anything about it. You are pretty close to Barbara. Have you ever tried to—er—reason with her?"

Rufus merely shook his head.

Judge Playden sat down. He twiddled his thumbs for a few moments before venturing to put the question that had been uppermost in his thoughts for many a day.

"See here, Rufus, be frank with me. You are with Barbara a great deal of the time. Is there anything—er—between you? I used to think she cared a lot for you."

"We are just—good friends, sir,—that's all," replied his son, steadily.

"I thought perhaps,—ahem!"

"I suppose people have been talking. It's natural that they should. But there's nothing in it, father. We're just good friends."

"Shelby Wayne asked me point blank to-day if I thought you two were interested in each other."

"He did, eh?"

"I don't mind telling you what he said on the subject. He said he hoped to God that you and Barbara would get married." He hesitated a moment or two. "He has always wanted you for a son-in-law."

Rufus did not lift his eyes from the desk blotter on which he was making geometrical designs with a paper cutter.

"Barbara picked out a son-in-law for him a couple of

years ago," he said quietly. "You may have noticed that she didn't pick me."

"That's all past and gone," said his father, hastily. "She must realize now that her father's choice was a better one than hers."

"She still worships Bennie Jaggard."

"She ought to hate his bones," snapped the Judge.

Rufus slowly raised his eyes. "Did Mr. Wayne say anything that might lead you to believe he had discussed—er—me with Barbara? I mean, in that way?"

"No, but I put two and two together. He said he asked her not long ago if she ever intended to marry again."

"Well? And what did she say?"

"He admitted that she was flippant, but still there was something significant in her reply. She said she'd have to consult her attorney about it. She said she never did anything without your approval. It set him to thinking."

"Well, she hasn't consulted me yet," said Rufus dryly.

"You remember that I hurt your feelings a year ago, Rufus, when I said I hoped you wouldn't take Bennie Jaggard's leavings, so to speak. I was afraid of that, I will confess. We didn't know at that time that Bennie had lied about her. I can't help saying that I am convinced you would have asked her to be your wife at that time, notwithstanding what we all believed to be the truth. You still love her, my boy. I can see that. Is there any reason why you shouldn't ask Bennie Jaggard's widow to marry you when you were perfectly willing to marry his mistress?"

Rufus started. What was his father driving at? A quick, piercing look into the older man's eyes reassured him, however. He breathed easier.

"Yes," said he, crisply. "I don't want to run the risk of losing her as a friend."

"I don't understand."

"Simply this, sir. She'd refuse me and—well, things never could be the same after that."

"Are you sure she would refuse you?"

"Absolutely," said Rufus, rising. "I hope you will forgive me, father, if I say that I don't care to discuss the matter."

"I am sorry, Rufus," said his father, after a moment. "I wouldn't have brought up the subject if I had known how you feel about it. Still, I cannot drop the matter without saying that it would make me very happy if you were to marry Barbara Wayne."

"Barbara Jaggard, you mean."

A slow, whimsical smile spread over the deeply lined face of the Judge. "If for no other reason than to give her a name that she needn't be ashamed of, my son."

With that, he turned away and walked out of the room, leaving his son to reflect upon this ironic alternative. A name that she needn't be ashamed of! A bitter smile twisted his lips. He got up presently and began pacing the floor like an animal in a circus cage. The back office was but little more spacious than a cage. A new light began to fill his somber, frowning eyes; in a little while they were brilliant again, aglow with the hope that had never really died. He had not thought of asking Barbara Jaggard to marry him. He had killed her husband. He could go on loving her to the end of his days, but as for asking her to marry him,—it had never entered his head. How could he ask her to become the wife of the man who had slain her husband? And yet—why not? Why not? She would never know. Suppose,—aye, just suppose,—that she came in time to love him and wanted him for her husband. Time might do that to her. Time and his own overpowering love. Would it be right for him to deny her happiness if she could find it in being his wife? And he *could* give her an honored and respected name. If they had children they would not be named Jaggard. . . . But what a devil of a thing for his father to have said,—and not in jest, either, notwithstanding his smile. . . . Even if she were willing to marry him

for the sake of changing her name . . . that was better than nothing, hateful as it seemed . . . and he would give her more than a name, he would give her endless love and devotion.

He could not stand being cooped up in that little office any longer. He would have to get out where his thoughts could ride free on wings that would carry them to reckless heights. Putting on his overcoat, he hurried through the outer office and down the stairs, pausing only long enough to say that he would be back by five o'clock. Striking off down the street without any particular objective in mind, he soon found himself approaching the river bridge.

On the other side of the bridge, beyond the sycamores and at the top of the ridge to the south stood Barbara's home. It was not in view till he was past the narrow fringe of trees. He slowed down and soon came to a stop. For a long time he stood at the roadside, leaning against the fence, his gaze fixed on the distant house. He pictured himself living up there with Barbara, passing his nights there and—

"But, you poor fool," he wailed inwardly, his spirits falling from an exalted height, "she won't have you! What's the sense of even thinking about it? She doesn't care for me in that way. I must be crazy. Clean off my base. The way she looked at me out of the car window was enough. Go home, you poor fool,—go home! But, O my God, how I want her,—how I want her! I would go to hell for her." His eyes were blazing. "Clean to hell,—and stay there forever if she'd only give me a little of her life beforehand. What's the sense of trying to make myself believe I couldn't marry her because of what I did to Bennie? If she'd have me, I'd—— And why shouldn't I? Why shouldn't I have her? God knows, I haven't done anything to be ashamed of. My conscience is clear. I'd do it all over again to-day. I'd do it for her sake,—not for my own. Why should I care whether she thinks one of her brothers did it? Everybody else thinks so. She is the only one who blames them for

doing what everybody else says was a mighty good job—and a decent one. And I'm almost sure she doesn't really blame them, either. Father is right. She ought to hate Bennie Jaggard's bones. Maybe she does,—God, maybe she does!"

His thoughts rambled on in this fashion for a long time. Finally he squared his shoulders, threw up his head, and smiled as he strode back through the early dusk toward the bridge. He was possessed of a grim sort of exaltation. He was no longer afraid to ask Barbara to marry him for fear,—amazing paradox,—that she might consent.

It seemed to him that his heart was lighter. He felt warmer. The smile lingered, his eyes were seeing things that gave back to them their old-time brilliance. As he swung along with his head high and a little cocked, as one who challenges, he recalled that Shelby Wayne and his own father and both of Barbara's brothers would be pleased if—yes, and not one of them could accuse him of marrying her for her money, for they all knew that he would have made her his wife when she was as poor as Job's turkey. The whole town knew that. The whole town was shocked and disappointed when she married Bennie Jaggard. Everybody had said she made a horrible mistake in not marrying Rufus Playden. And he remembered once overhearing Mrs. Higgs say that Bennie would be alive to-day and Barbara's brothers would not have had to kill him if she had used a little common-sense and taken Judge Playden's son when she had the chance.

Not for an instant,—at no time, in fact,—did he have the slightest feeling of remorse for having shot Bennie Jaggard. Strange as it may seem, his conscience never troubled him. He had done no wrong. And yet he was never able to pass that spot in the lane without a feeling of dread. He could still see Bennie's body on the ground, a sprawling, shapeless object in the blackness of the night; he would never forget

his face as it was momentarily illuminated by the flash of the pistol. The spot was haunted, not by the ghost of his victim but by the ghost of his deed.

He remembered one afternoon, not so long ago, when, without thinking, he gave his lead pencil to Bennie's baby to play with, and he had laughed when Barbara snatched it away because the child had put the cartridge end of it into his mouth.

"Baby!" she had cried, and to Rufus she had said, angrily: "You ought not to give him that brass thing to play with. It's poison. It might kill him."

It was not until he was walking briskly up Center Street, with the sidewalk lamps beginning to break out of the settling darkness, that his shoulders sagged and the old feeling of despair bore down upon him. Barbara did not love him. How could any woman love him? He had an ugly nose, an ugly mouth, ugly hair and—why, he was an ugly man! Why should Barbara marry an ugly man?

Two or three nights later Stella Davidson and Tom were married. He was the only person outside of the two families to be invited to the house. He went. But one construction could have been put upon his failure to attend: a decision on his part to take his stand with Barbara in the silent but bitter conflict between sister and brother. And who was he, after all, to turn against George and Tom Wayne? They had faced judge and jury in his stead, they were carrying his crime on their shoulders. And more than all that, Barbara herself would have despised him even more than he would have despised himself if he had denied Tom for her sake. He knew her well. She was that kind. She would have called him a traitor and turned him from her door.

There was something significant in the Rev. Mr. Davidson's manner when, in the course of the ceremony, he was called upon to give the bride away. He spoke loudly, al-

most defiantly, and he looked about him as if challenging any one present to question his judgment in giving his daughter to Thomas Wayne.

Rufus quickly turned his head away. His gaze fell upon the face of Shelby Wayne and he was startled. The older Wayne's lips were compressed, his eyes were slightly narrowed and seemed somehow to glitter. He stood very straight, his head up; for a moment or two his body stiffened. Then, recovering himself, he lowered his eyes and allowed his body to relax. He too had noticed that Joseph Davidson did not put his daughter's hand in Tom's. And it was a long time before the ruddy color came back to replace the pallor that had spread over his cheeks.

Afterwards Stella's mother, a gentle, kindly woman, spoke to Rufus about Shelby Wayne. They were having supper. Her eyes were dark with compassion.

"It is terrible, Rufus," she said, lowering her voice as she looked across the room to where the bridegroom's father was conversing with her brother-in-law, Dr. Higgs. "He has aged ten years or more in the past year. He broods a lot. Dr. Higgs was saying only the other day that he seems to be going all to pieces,—just simply eating his heart out over this dreadful thing."

"It's terrible," was all that Rufus could find to say.

"Is it true that he is drinking a great deal?"

"They say he drinks more than he used to. He has always been a—er—a mild drinker, Mrs. Davidson. Most southerners are, you know. But I've never seen him drunk in my life."

"It is this dreadful situation. His own children,—I can't imagine anything more heart-breaking. He loves all three of them and—— Dear me, it just simply is too awful."

"He has the consolation of knowing that all three of them love him, Mrs. Davidson."

Rufus's hand was steady as he lifted the coffee-cup to his lips.

"But that is just what makes it so terrible, Rufus," she murmured sadly. "Can't you see?"

"Yes,—I see what you mean," said he, and for the scantest second his hand shook as he lowered the cup to the saucer. His steel nerve faltered,—but only for an instant. "I've never seen anything lovelier than Stella is to-night. 'Pon my soul, she is exquisite. What a lucky dog Tom Wayne is."

"They love each other," said she softly. Her eyes swam in a passing mist of tears. "Rufus, Tom Wayne is as good as gold."

"Better," said he. "Gold will tarnish, you know."

"He adores you."

A glaze stole swiftly across Rufus's brilliant eyes and was gone. "I—I am very fond of him," he said, impulsively. "Nothing in the world, Mrs. Davidson, could alter my feelings toward George and Tom Wayne."

"I am sure of that, Rufus," said she, laying her hand on his arm. "You were the best, the most loyal friend they had when they—when they were in trouble."

"I would have died for them if necessary, Mrs. Davidson," said he cryptically. "What a jolly girl Ella Chester is," he went on, abruptly changing the subject.

"All Louisville girls are. Are you going to the train?"

"Sure," said Rufus. "I've got a couple of old shoes in my overcoat pocket."

And an hour or so later, he stood on the Davidson porch and threw the old shoes after the automobile in which the bride and groom started for the station. He followed in another car with the Chester girls and George and showered rice upon them as they boarded the southbound train. Half-a-hundred joyous, boisterous, young people were on the platform to see them off.

Rufus walked home, declining all invitations to ride. He wanted to be alone.

It was nearly eleven o'clock when he entered the house.

His father was still up, an unusual thing for him. He was lounging in a comfortable chair before the fireplace in the sitting-room, his outstretched feet close to the brass fender. The sitting-room in Judge Playden's house was a sort of combination library, study and consultation chamber. A long table near one of the windows was littered with legal documents, law-books and reports. The telephone stood at one end, at the other was a small glass aquarium in which there were four or five goldfish. The Judge claimed that it always rested him when he was working his hardest to see how satisfactorily the fish managed to get along in the world without the slightest suggestion of physical or mental effort.

He was wearing the tattered, ancient and well-beloved smoking-jacket that had been in the family since the first anniversary of his marriage,—a quilted affair that once had been dark maroon but now was of no particular hue at all. His feet were comfortably encased in a pair of carpet slippers that came along on the second anniversary and still held their own, despite time and the vain attempt of nobbier interlopers of leather and velvet to supplant them in favor. Mary, who had been in the family for over thirty years, was authority for the statement that up in Judge Playden's closet there were fifteen or twenty pairs of slippers, of all kinds and (she feared) of various sizes, with which generous clients of modest means had remembered their lawyer at Christmastime, "just as if he was the preacher."

"Hello, father. What are you doing up as late as this?" said Rufus, advancing to the fireplace. "Waiting to hear about the wedding? You're as bad as a woman, sir."

"Was it a pretty wedding?"

"Very. Stella was lovely. She's a mighty pretty girl. I went to the station to see them off."

The Judge uncrossed his long legs and hitched himself up in the chair.

"I waited up to see you about something else. The wedding will keep till to-morrow. Barbara called up on the telephone along about ten o'clock, just after I'd gone upstairs."

Rufus stared incredulously. "Did you say Barbara called up?"

"Yes."

"From Chicago? Did she want me?" An eager light flashed in his eyes.

"She is at home."

"Here in—in Hurdleford?"

"Yes. Came down on the train that connected at Radley with the one Tom and Stella took out of here a little while ago."

"Well—can you beat—— Are you sure about it, father? She was planning to stay a week or so."

"She changed her mind."

"The train Tom and Stella left on was nearly an hour late," muttered Rufus, bewildered. "By George, it's lucky she didn't wait over in Radley for it. She'd have bumped right into the wedding party,—rice and confetti and all that. I'll call her up right away. She didn't say what she wanted me for, did she?"

"She did not ask for you, Rufus. It was me she wanted to talk to."

Rufus sat down suddenly. Something seemed to have given way in his knees. He paled a little.

"She didn't ask for me?"

"No. She wants to see me to-morrow about something or other. I made an appointment to go up to her house at eleven o'clock. She would not come down to the office."

Rufus felt his blood turning icy cold. What did this mean? Had she discovered something? Or,—and this was

staggering,—was she going to take her affairs out of his hands and turn everything over to his father? Because of what he had said to her the other day at the station? Had she made up her mind to dismiss him because of—— Another fear intervened: had she decided to take her business away from the firm altogether and engage new counsel?

"Why wouldn't she come to the office?" he managed to inquire.

"Something of a private nature, I guess. Evidently she does not want to discuss it before you or Sam Crouse." He was eyeing his son closely. "I haven't the slightest idea what it can be."

"Neither have I. I never was so surprised in my life."

"Barbara is given to doing things that surprise people."

"I think I ought to call her up," began Rufus, in considerable agitation. "If there's anything wrong——"

"I asked her if she wanted you to call her up when you came in and she said you were not to bother. She said she would call you up to-morrow sometime."

"Oh,—she did?" His eyes brightened, he breathed easier.

"She told me why she came home to-night. She had made up her mind that it was cowardly to run away because of this wedding. I must confess that I thought it was cowardly myself,—and I told her so. She's got to face things like that as long as she lives here in Hurdleford and it doesn't do her a bit of good to run away from them. Yes, she agreed, it was showing the white feather and she hated herself for it. She would have got here sooner, just to be in town when it took place, only the impulse did not strike her in time."

"But she—she wouldn't have gone to the wedding anyhow. She wasn't asked,—she wasn't wanted."

The blood was warming again in Rufus's veins and struggling back into his cheeks. It wasn't as bad as he feared.

"Quite true. But she would have been holding her fort up there instead of abandoning it, my boy."

Rufus's anxious eyes were on the telephone. His father shook his head.

"She was very particular about that, Rufus. You were not to call up. As a matter of fact, she had Mrs. Robbins call up first to make sure that you were not at home."

"I can't understand it," murmured his son.

CHAPTER NINE

RUFUS PUTS ON HIS CROWN

DICK CARR had driven over to Radley to meet the train from Chicago. Mrs. Robbins had received a telegram sent early in the evening from a town seventy-five or eighty miles up the line, instructing her to have Carr meet the through train due in Radley at nine-ten. He was waiting on the platform when Barbara stepped down from the Pullman. Rushing up to relieve the porter of her bags, he betrayed the household anxiety and curiosity by exclaiming:

"By gosh, this is a surprise, Mis' Jaggard. What's the matter? Took sick or something?"

"Good evening, Dick. My trunk is checked through to Hurdleford, so you needn't bother now. You can get it in the morning. I want to get home as soon as possible. Where is the car?"

"Right over here, ma'am. Wasn't worryin' about the baby, was you? He's as fine as silk. *You* look all right yourself. Mis' Robbins thought maybe you'd took sick or——"

"I am perfectly well, thank you," and that was all the reward he got for his curiosity.

"Yes, sir," said Dick Carr, walking with unaccustomed rapidity in order to keep pace with her and determined to say something pleasant; "that baby's gettin' to look more like you every day, Mis' Jaggard."

Barbara gave him a sharp look out of the tail of her eye.

"He doesn't look any more like me than he does like you," she said curtly. "And you know it."

Dick was mute until they reached the car. Then he said: "How's Chicago, Mis' Jaggard? All there?" He was satisfied with no answer.

They were home before ten o'clock. Barbara's first act, before she removed hat or coat, was to go up to the baby's room. She could hear Miss Remster taking a bath. For a long time she bent over his crib, gazing lovingly, tenderly down at the sleeping child. At last she bent down and lightly touched his rosy cheek with her lips.

"Oh, Bennie, Bennie!" she murmured chokingly, and it was not of the child she was thinking.

A few minutes later Mrs. Robbins heard the door to the side porch open and shut almost stealthily. She looked out of the kitchen window and in the moonlight saw Barbara's tall, shadowy figure crossing the yard toward the lower gate in the neat white fence that had been constructed during the summer. The old housekeeper gazed after her until she was swallowed up by the darkness below the lane. She knew where the girl was going; a chill wave of pity swept over her.

"Poor lamb!" she sighed. "Now I know why she hurried home. I wouldn't have thought it of her, though. My goodness me! You wouldn't catch me out there after dark. And this is the first time I've ever known her to go down there at night. She just couldn't bear to be separated so far from him, even for a week."

But Mrs. Robbins's calculations were wrong. Barbara's purpose in visiting the forlorn little graveyard on the slope was not at all what Mrs. Robbins took it to be. True, she had never been out there at night before. Almost daily she had gone down to the Jaggard burying-ground, a scant two hundred yards from the house. It was not so lonely, so depressing out there in the sunshine. Now she was resolved to see what it would be like in the ghostly murk of moonlight,—the silent tombstones, the grim little mounds, the rustling grass and flower-stalks that were dead now but would come to life again. For weeks her thoughts at night had been of the time when she too would lie out there among

these stranger, enemy Jaggards, alone in the dark with them, not one of her own people close by to keep her company.

Over on the other side of the river, two miles away, was the spreading and ever-growing little city of the dead where her own people slept, surrounded by hundreds of others; here on the hillside were five graves, three Jaggards and the two women who had brought Jaggards into the world. She herself was mother to a Jaggard. Was she doomed to lie there with them, far from her own people, every night of her life? She shuddered at the thought of it.

It would never have occurred to her to go to the Hurdleford cemetery at night,—indeed, the mere prospect was appalling,—but, strange to say, she was in no actual terror to-night. She had made up her mind before leaving Chicago that she would do this thing; she would go down there at night and, standing alive among them, ask herself if she could be buried forever with them. She knew it was silly, unreasonable,—but it would help her to decide a weighty question.

She stood among the graves, straight and tense and as cold as ice. An invisible moon and a million twinkling stars cast a sickly light over everything. There were warm, cheerful spots of light in the house at the foot of the long slope, however,—the house in which she and those other Waynes were born. Time and again her gaze was turned toward them. They would not disappear, she knew, until other Waynes came home from the wedding. A chill November wind sighed through the cedars at the top of the hill. Far away in the night sounded the whistle of a locomotive. Tom's train,—Tom's and Stella's.

Her lips were stiff when she spoke aloud, as if for the dead Jaggards to hear.

"My God! How can I lie here with these people? They are strangers to me. I do not belong with them. I am not a Jaggard,—I am not one of you. I will not be bound to you after I am dead. Bennie! Bennie! Why can't I take

you away from them? They are dead. They will not know, they will not miss you. You took me away from my people when they were alive. Why can't I take you away from yours, now that they are dead? But, oh, Bennie, my darling, I—I cannot come down here when I am dead and lie with these people whom I hated,—oh, how I hated your people, Bennie. You know I did. I never deceived you about that. I never tried to make you believe I cared for them or respected them. It is too much to ask of me to be—to be buried out here in this dreadful place. It cannot be. I will give up everything rather than that. I am a coward. I am afraid of these dead people. But I am not afraid of my own people who are dead. I am not a Jaggard. I never can be one. I am a Wayne. I shall go back to my people, Bennie, after I am dead. I loved you. I love you now. I will never stop loving you. You are here in this graveyard because I sent you home to be killed. If I were not a coward I should lie here beside you till the end of time. But, God help me, I cannot lie with the Jaggards. Your father hated me. He took you to his heart when you told him what you had done to me. He was glad. On his deathbed he must have laughed with joy. He has got you back now but he doesn't want me. I own the ground he is buried in, and you are buried in, Bennie—all because he believed I was dirt under your feet. He is dirt under my feet now. See! I stand here among you and look in all directions. I would give up every foot of this land rather than lie here among you with the name of Jaggard on my tombstone. This, Bennie dear, is my decision."

Mrs. Robbins, watching from the darkened kitchen, saw her shadowy figure emerge from the gloom and hurry across the yard. A door opened and closed. A few minutes elapsed before the older woman ventured into the sitting-room. Barbara had thrown off her hat and coat and was warming her hands before the blazing logs in the fireplace. Her face was white and set as she turned her head.

"I wish you would call up Judge Playden's house and ask if he is alone. If he is, I would like to speak to him on the 'phone. Make sure that he is alone."

Mystified and considerably troubled by the command and by the queer light in Barbara's eyes, the housekeeper obeyed.

Playden! Barbara was saying the name over and over again to herself. She liked the sound of it. It was a fine old name. They were fine men, these Playdens. Playden! An old family, a respected name, a background that stretched into old Virginia and beyond that to England.

She made an appointment with the Judge for the following morning. Then she went to bed. She would find out the next day just where she stood.

Early the following morning Dick Carr drove her over to the cemetery where her grandfather, Colonel George Wayne, was buried, alongside her grandmother, a Studley, and her own mother,—three graves in the Wayne lot where there was room for a dozen more. Near by was the Playden lot with ten or twelve headstones and a tall granite shaft.

"I will not be excommunicated," she said to herself, standing beside her grandfather's grave. Her eyes were shining. "From now on I am free from the horror of that other thing. My people are here. I belong with them. I do not belong up there with old Benjamin Jaggard and Absalom. My son is Bennie's son. He is a Jaggard. His place is with them when his time comes. I must not rob Bennie of his son. But I am free. They sha'n't have me. Oh, what a stubborn, arrogant fool I've been all this time, all this miserable year, trying to make myself believe that I am a Jaggard, trying to make my own people believe that I do not care. I *do* care! God, how I loathe the name now! But how I loved it while Bennie was alive to bear it with me. Just we two together. That was different. Just we two."

She made her way slowly, with bent head, to the gate, where Dick Carr was waiting.

"Where to now, Miss Barbara,—I mean Mis' Jaggard?"

"Home," she replied in her abstraction, and suddenly found herself wondering if she had ever used the word before in relation to her abode on the hill.

Judge Playden came at the appointed hour. The Hinkle girl took his hat and overcoat and hung them up in a hall closet. A new wrinkle, thought he. In no other house in Hurdleford was the "hired girl" expected to go to that much trouble for a visitor. City ways. He smiled a little over the thought of Lily Hinkle coming down to that,—or, on the other hand, arising to it. Either way you looked at it, it was extraordinary. He found Barbara in the sitting-room. (He did not overlook the fact that Lily had said Mrs. Jaggard was in the "living-room, Judge.") Miss Remster was there with Benjamin the Third, who ceased laughing when he beheld the stranger and solemnly and industriously began to suck the middle fingers of his clubby little hand.

"Wave your hand to the Judge, dearie," said Barbara, who seemed flushed and excited. She had been playing with the baby.

Judge Playden waved his hand but received only an unblinking stare in return. As he shook hands with Barbara he remarked dryly:

"He's a Jaggard, all right. I never knew one of them to wave his hand at anybody in my life."

"Or shake their fists, for that matter, Judge," said Barbara, with one of her slow, significant smiles. "Take him upstairs, Miss Remster, please. Judge Playden is here on business."

When they were alone, she motioned to a chair in front of the fireplace and drew up a smaller one for herself.

"I sha'n't keep you long, Judge Playden," she began without preliminary. "Please sit down."

"Nothing serious, I hope, Barbara?"

She sat down and instantly crossed her knees, a sign that indicated inward perturbation to the old lawyer, belying the calmness revealed in her face.

"That depends," said she. "I want you to settle a question or two for me. We will come straight to the point. First of all, Judge Playden, this is a matter I prefer to discuss with you and not with Rufus. I am afraid, if you will allow me to say so, that he would not be as likely as you to give me sound advice in this matter."

"I am older than Rufus, of course," said Judge Playden, whimsically.

"And perhaps a little more disinterested," she said.

"Naturally," said he, with a smile.

"I wish you would tell me whether I would forfeit any of the rights I now hold in the Jaggard estate under my husband's will if I decide to marry,—I am not contemplating such a thing, of course,—and in that event change my name. I am not clear on that point. In fact, I do not know the contents of Absalom Jaggard's will. Does it specify,—if that is the right word,—that in case his son should die before I do, it would be impossible for his widow to remarry and,—this may sound very harsh to you, Judge Playden,—take another name?"

Her listener's expression did not change. Years of training had provided him with a mask behind which he could hide not only surprise but confusion as well. Nevertheless, he was distinctly startled.

"You forget, Barbara, that Absalom Jaggard was not aware that Bennie had a wife."

"A slip of the tongue. I have not forgotten," said she, her lip curling ever so slightly. "He took the precaution, however, of providing a grave for one in the event that his son ever did marry, a reasonable thing to expect, I should say. It has occurred to me that if he presumed to go to such lengths as that, he might have gone even farther and—

ah, what is the word?—well, ordained that his son's widow could not marry again without in some way being penalized for the act in case she had had children,—a son, in particular,—by Bennie Jaggard."

She leaned back in the chair, uncrossing her knees, and waited for the Judge to reply. His intense, searching look did not cause her to shift her gaze from his face. His hesitation was brief.

"You mean, I take it, that he may have fixed it so that Bennie's widow would have to remain a widow, bearing his name, or forfeit her interest in the property?"

"Precisely," said she.

"I have a copy of Absalom Jaggard's will. You may see it at any time, Barbara. There is nothing in it that would in any way jeopardize your position if you should choose to marry again."

She straightened up slowly, her eyes brightening.

"That was an oversight on his part, wasn't it?" she inquired, after drawing a long breath. It seemed to him that there was a faint tremor in her voice, as of sudden exhaustion.

"Your husband's will was even simpler. You and the child that was coming are his sole heirs. You are the baby's guardian until he is of age, appointed by the court, as you will remember."

"You are absolutely sure about this, Judge Playden? I mean,—in case I should decide to marry again?"

"Absolutely."

"Now, there is another point," she went on, leaning forward. He caught the flash of uneasiness that swept across her momentarily unguarded eyes. "Absalom Jaggard says in his will that his son and his son's heirs must be buried in the family burying-ground. Suppose that I, as one of the heirs, refuse to abide by that command?"

"I can see that you have given this matter a great deal of thought, Barbara. But have you ever stopped to consider

that you can't take all of the Jaggard property with you when you die?"

"I don't quite catch your meaning, Judge."

"In plain words, then, why should you worry about what becomes of the property after you are dead? You will be through with it. You will have had it all of your life and it won't be worth a tinker's dam to you after you're dead."

"I get the point, even though you are a bit cryptical," said she, nodding her head. "But suppose I should marry again and have other children?"

"Absalom Jaggard's will, as I recall it, explicitly states that the property is left to his son Benjamin and his natural heirs. As a matter of fact, your husband's will leaves whatsoever he may die possessed of to you and to his own issue. It's pretty clear, Barbara. You are, of course, entitled to your dower interest. That is yours by law. You could leave your share to children by another marriage, I believe, notwithstanding Absalom Jaggard's provision that the estate must descend to Bennie's natural heirs. If you wish, I will refresh my memory by another examination of the two wills and give you an opinion. However, my dear Barbara, I am quite sure that you can marry again without jeopardizing your specific rights." He cleared his throat. "I hope you will not be offended if I say that you ought to marry again. You are very young and it would be wrong to——"

"Pardon me, Judge Playden, if I interrupt you to admit that I am very young and therefore need not be in any great haste to marry again,—if ever," she broke in, calmly. "I am only twenty-four. I fancy you will agree that I am young enough to take my time about it," she went on, with a smile.

"Most certainly,—most certainly," stammered the other, conscious of a rebuff.

"I need not remind you, I am sure, that my inquiries are of a strictly confidential character. Is it necessary for you to discuss them with the other members of your firm?"

"Not at all. You are consulting me as a friend, not as a lawyer."

"Thank you," said she, arising. "You have not been up here since I did the house all over. Would you like to go over it with me and see what I have done with a little of the Jaggard money?"

He got to his feet. "I should like to, Barbara. My son tells me that you have made it very cozy and—er—attractive. It was a rather dreary place before you took hold of it. This room, for instance, is not what it used to be. Even Mrs. Jaggard wasn't able to convince Absalom that it—er—was not what she was accustomed to, to put it mildly."

"Perhaps she, also, put it mildly, Judge Playden," said Barbara, looking over her shoulder as she preceded him to the stairway. "I suppose she was afraid of him, poor thing."

"He was good to her," protested the Judge, loyally.

"Yes. He had her buried in the family lot. He made a Jaggard of her. You see, Judge, I've had the walls papered from kitchen to garret. Rather gay and sprightly, isn't it? One could sing or laugh in this house now without being glowered at by strait-laced wall-paper."

"Bless my soul, I wouldn't know the place. What's this? You must have put cushions under this stair carpet."

Barbara laughed. She was in gay spirits now.

"Just wait till you see the rug in my bedroom. It's an inch thick and—goodness, how nice it feels under your bare feet."

When he was ready to depart she sent for Dick Carr and ordered him to take the old lawyer to town in the automobile.

"But, my dear, I walked up. I guess I can walk back," protested the Judge.

"You walked up because you were too loyal to patronize

Brink Davis," said she, putting her arm through his as they descended the steps. She squeezed it suddenly.

He smiled. "I couldn't feel at home in anything but one of the Wayne boys' cars," he said.

"I hope you will always feel at home in mine, Judge Playden," said she, and all the way to town he puzzled his brain over that remark.

The winter dragged its chill, blustery days and nights through to spring. Judge Playden still wondered. The hope that had sprung from the construction he was pleased to put upon those significant words shrunk into doubt and then gave way entirely to resignation. The thing he longed to hear Rufus say every time he came home from Barbara's house, after spending an evening with her, was never uttered. Many a night he had waited up far beyond his bedtime for his boy to come in, flushed and triumphant, to tell him that he was the happiest man alive, and the luckiest, because Barbara had promised to marry him.

The young mistress of the house on the hill spent two weeks in New York, followed by a fortnight in Atlantic City at Easter. Subsequently, late in May, she went to Chicago for a week. In both instances she traveled alone, entrusting the baby to the care of Miss Remster and Mrs. Robbins, knowing full well that all feminine Hurdleford would criticize her severely for leaving him behind while she went gallivanting off to have a good time,—and heaven only knew what she was up to, gossip would add.

Sure enough, wise ladies suspected that there was a young man in the East. Once more people began to feel sorry for poor Rufus. Next thing they knew, she'd be coming home with a good-for-nothing husband,—one of those impractical artist fellows who would jump at the chance to fall into a luxurious living without having to work for it and at the same time get the prettiest, shapeliest, young woman in the county for a wife. No wonder she didn't take the baby along!

But all that Barbara brought home from the East was a lot of new gowns,—she was “coming out of mourning,”—and the laconic report that she had had a good time. She set a number of minds at rest,—after they had been frightfully upset by her admission that she had been accompanied on the Atlantic City jaunt by an artist friend,—when she smilingly and rather mockingly explained that the friend was a woman.

It was true, she did take one of the young women acquaintances of those old Tenth Street days to the Jersey resort, paying all of her expenses and receiving in exchange a taste of something she had come to love and would always miss,—gay, whilom companionship.

A little line put its shadow between her eyes as the months went by, and there were times when she brooded darkly, thoughtfully, as if in the torment of indecision. She had come to realize one thing, however, and from that there was no getting away: the rest of her life would have to be spent in Hurdleford and in the house on the hill. She would not surrender a foot of Jaggard land nor a cent of Jaggard money, no matter what the cost. And she was young and strong and full of passion. But above all other things, she was staunch. It was out of the question for her ever to love another man as she had loved Bennie Jaggard. She could not conceive of that. If she married again, the great passion would be lacking; it could never come again. She could bestow respect and affection of a kind, but—Bennie had won and still kept the love that had not had time to cool in an all too brief a spell of rapture.

Yes, the house on the hill was to be her home for heaven knew how many years. It was so written. “My son, Benjamin, and his offspring . . . for twenty years . . .” Her life was cut out for her: the solemn, earnest business of being the head of and mistress of this huge estate and to conduct its affairs, not only for herself but for Bennie’s boy, with a single purpose in mind,—to increase its value and to

improve upon the foundations laid down in craft, parsimony and relentlessness.

After all,—and there was bright triumph in the thought,—this house in which she dwelt had once belonged to an ancestor of hers, a Studley. Old Benjamin Jaggard had squeezed it and many a fertile acre out of her grandmother's husband. Fate had given it back to one of his own people after all the years it had been in the hands of the alien, the usurper. It pleased her to think of old Benjamin as "the usurper." Sometimes she wondered if fate and justice had not combined to give to her in this way the very house and land she might have inherited had they remained in possession of William Studley. Strange visions grew out of the thought. The Waynes might have come to this house to live instead of in the little place at the foot of the slope, and she would have been born here, and George and Tom, too,—and there would have been no Jaggards to hate. No Bennie to love.

She saw a great deal of her father in these days. Somehow she knew that he was breaking. There was a look in his eyes, there were lines in his face, and there was a strange sagging of his shoulders when he thought no one was watching, that told the story far clearer than words. He drank steadily but he carried it well. No one had ever seen him intoxicated. But never in all the times they were together, either walking or riding, did she ask him to come to her house. She knew what that would mean. He would only set his jaws, shake his head, smile grimly, and that would be the end of it. Nor did he ever attempt to persuade her to visit the old home. George was still living there and Tom was a frequent visitor, sometimes with Stella and sometimes alone. The young couple had rented a little old brick house, one of the first to be built in that part of the country, and were enthusiastically engrossed in transforming it into one of the quaintest and most attractive places in town.

Always Shelby Wayne said good-by to his daughter at the

foot of the lane. The point was never argued. He insisted on walking home from there, refusing to allow her to put him down at his own front gate.

One soft, warm evening in the month of May she sat alone on the side porch waiting for Rufus Playden who had telephoned to ask if he could come up that night for a little while. She had not seen him in more than a week. She was lonely and she was tired. Her days had been busy ones, for she was in truth overseeing the early work on the various farms. But the nights, after the baby was in bed and the household had settled down, were given over to thoughts that drifted far from the things that busied her brain and flesh by day.

On the still night air came the faraway sound of a fiddle,—a rollicking tune, sometimes clear and distinct and sometimes lost in the airy distance. She knew the fiddler. Her brother George, sitting out on the porch of the little house down there among the oaks, playing for his father. Perhaps Tom was there too, and Stella. Back when she was a tiny girl George had played the same old fiddle, haltingly, determinedly, with frowning eyes and set jaws. How she had laughed at him and mockingly screeched at him!

And now she remembered the time her brother George loftily had laughed at her. She had quite forgotten the occasion. She was seven and he a gangling boy with romantic, heroic notions in his head. It wasn't much, of course, but if it had not been for George,—lazy, dreamy George,—she would have died at the age of seven. She had ventured to lean out through an open place in the rickety old covered bridge that crossed the river, and down she went into deep water, fifteen feet below. George, ambling along behind her on the way home from town, awoke from his dream of fair ladies and valiant heroes, and rushing up to the opening, sprang in after her. She was half-drowned when he got her ashore. And when she tried to tell him that night how brave he was and how sorry she was that he

had ruined his best suit, he had only laughed and said "gosh," it was nothing. If it had only been some lovely, entrancing girl who wasn't his sister,—well, that *would* have been something to talk about! She wondered if he would have killed a man for wronging any other girl except his sister.

Rufus came around the corner of the house. Lately he had been taking a short cut, approaching the house through the wide orchard on the opposite slope of the ridge. Her thoughts had been of him earlier in the evening and of what she knew,—but he did not:—that this visit of his was to be a portentous one. But the sound of that fiddle far off in the night had sent them into another channel and she was not annoyed with him for being so late. It was nearly nine. Usually he was there by eight.

"I'm sorry I couldn't get here any sooner, Barbara," he said, after she had informed him in a curiously nervous way that it was a lovely evening and he had sat down on the steps at her feet. "We had a client in from the country. He stayed to supper with father and me, talking over the case that comes up to-morrow in Radley."

"You are working too hard, Rufus. You look thin and peaked."

The porch light shone down upon his upturned face. He smiled and shrugged his shoulders. "Heaven knows, I can't afford to spare an ounce. Especially off of my face. It's hatchet-faced enough without additional sharpening."

"Where have you been all this time? I'd begun to think you had deserted me."

His face sobered. The look in his honest eyes caused her to turn her own away after a moment. There was hopeless love and a sort of reproof in them. But it was what she wanted. She liked being loved, even by poor Rufus whom she did not love.

"You know better than that," he said at last.

She forced herself to look down again into his eyes. They

were dark and troubled now and full of pain. Suddenly, impulsively, she laid her hand on his head.

"I am sorry, Rufus," she said gently and rather humbly. Even Bennie, with all his wild passion, had not loved her as this man did. That much she knew.

He reached up and took her hand in his. Before she realized what he was doing he had pressed his lips to it. She felt his fingers quiver. Something told her that his whole body was trembling. He released her hand almost instantly and leaned back against the porch post.

"I will tell you the truth, Barbara, if you must have it. I love you. I guess you know it, so that's not news to you. I've loved you for years. I loved you even after you—after you went away with him. But that's neither here nor there. The reason I was late in getting here to-night was because I had to talk things over with my father. I have decided to withdraw from the firm and—and go away, Barbara."

There was dead silence for many seconds. Her eyes narrowed. Her body stiffened a little, as one who is subjected to an affront, an inconceivable affront.

"Why are you going away, Rufus, if you love me as you say you do?" she asked at last. Her voice was steady.

To her surprise and, in a sense, chagrin, he was mute. She had expected something different. Deliberately she had given him the opening. He continued to stare out into the blackness that lay beyond reach of the light falling upon them.

Presently she sighed and leaned back in the chair, half-closing her eyes. She was conscious of a queer but natural revulsion of feeling. She had as much as offered herself to this man whom she did not love and he had kept his back to her.

"That is the reason why, Barbara," he said at last.

"You mean to say you cannot stay here in Hurdleford because you love me?"

"That is just what I mean. I simply can't stand it, that's all."

"I had no idea that a man had to run away from a town because there happened to be a woman in it that he loved. George isn't leaving town because he loves Kate Smith, is he?"

"Good God, Barbara!" he groaned. "Are you—are you roasting me? Isn't it enough that I'm eating my heart out for you? Why must you rub it in like this?"

"Don't talk like a fool, Rufus," she said, almost sharply.

"See here, Barbara," he began, turning on her suddenly; "let's get it over with. I'm not going to get down on my knees and grovel, I'm not going to act like a silly, lovesick boy. I came up here to-night with one purpose in mind. I've told you in plain words that I love you and always have. But I'm not such a fool as to go any farther than that when I know it would be useless. You don't love me. I'm not going to beg and plead and whine and all that sort of thing, you know. I'm not going to ask you to marry me when I know what your answer would be. You cannot——"

"What would my answer be?" she asked, huskily, cold from head to foot. She was in for it now. It was all of her own planning.

She heard him catch his breath. Then he looked up at her.

"You mean—— See here, I am not fooling, Barbara. I am in deadly earnest."

"I know you are, Rufus."

"Then why, in God's name, are you making sport of me, why are you——"

"Listen, Rufus," she broke in. Then abruptly she arose and strode to the door where she pushed the button that turned off the porch light. They were in darkness so sudden that it blinded them. She came and stood over him. "I can say what I have to say to you better without that," she went on, lowering her voice. "Don't get up. Sit there."

I'll stand. Wait till I've finished. You want to know what I would say if you asked me to marry you?"

"Oh, my God, Barbara," he gulped, wonder, hope, incredulity in his widespread eyes.

She was silent for a long time. Then: "I would not give you the same answer, Rufus, if you were to ask me if I love you with my whole heart. I must be honest with you. You are honest with me. I do not love you with my whole heart. You know that,—you must know it. I care for you, I admire you, I think the world of you,—and it hurts me to tell you that I can never love—you know what I mean—never love another man as I loved Bennie. No matter who I should marry, it would be the same. There is no man I care more for than I do for you. Now you understand, Rufus. If you care to ask me to marry you after this, I will say yes."

He stood up. The dim glow of an inner hall light, crossing the darkened living-room to find its way out through a window to their left, fell upon his face. He was on the step below her.

"I want you, Barbara," was all he could say. His voice was thick and tremulous.

She was startled by the strange light in his eyes; they glowed like steady, fulgent stars out of the vague shadow that was his face. Suddenly she felt weak and helpless where the moment before she had been strong, perhaps even impassive. There could be no retreat now.

"Well?" she muttered, almost savagely.

"God alone knows that I ought not to ask you to marry me, Barbara," he said quietly, not at all in the manner of an eager, reckless lover. "But,—I do ask you. Will you be my wife, Barbara?"

"I told you a moment ago what my answer would be if you asked me, Rufus."

"Say it now."

"Yes."

Still he made no move. "I understand perfectly what I am up against. So I'll not ask you if you love me."

"No. I also told you what my answer would be if you asked me that question," she said, levelly.

"And I know why you are willing to marry me," he went on.

She laughed nervously, jarringly. "I can never love any one else, Rufus. It might as well be you as any other man. Yes, it would much better be you, because I know you love me for myself and not for—for all this." She swept her hand in an encompassing gesture.

"You are marrying me because you have lost your nerve," he said. "You can't stand it any longer. You know what I mean, so don't deny it."

"How dare you speak to me in that manner, Rufus Playden?"

"You can't stand being called a Jaggard any longer, that's the long and short of it."

She thought quickly. "I hate the name,—yes. But has it occurred to you that I might not have any great difficulty in changing it for another without marrying you?"

"You mean, you could—or would marry some one else?"

"If that were the only reason, yes. But, Rufus, believe me or not, I do not want to marry any one else. Listen to me. If it had not been for Bennie I should have married you and I suppose I should have loved you. That may sound strange to you. It does to me. I thought—yes, I believed that I was in love with you once. Who knows what might have happened if—if I had not fallen in love with him."

"Oh, Barbara!" he cried, softly. "I want you so much! I cannot live without you. Take me, and I will give my life to you. And listen,—you may come to love me in time. I will do my best to make you. I will do my best, Barbara. Can't you see that even that is possible? You may come to love me, after all."

She leaned against the post. "We'll see," she said, after a moment. There was a trace of defiance in her manner as if she were giving voice to a challenge.

"Will you kiss me, Barbara?"

"Yes. Of course. Why not?"

An hour or so later he wended his way down through the orchard to the highway. His brain was in a turmoil of excitement, exaltation; the blood charged violently through his heart, causing it to leap and throb in such a manner that at times he slackened his speed, actually in fear that one of those smothering rushes might smite him down,—smite him cruelly in the hour of victory.

Coming at last to the fence bordering the road, he leaned against it, his elbows on the top rail, and there he stood for many minutes, reliving in a sense the hour that had just passed. She had permitted him to kiss her, then to take her in his arms. He remembered his own awkwardness, shyness, even timidity, and how at first she had not returned his kisses, she had not surrendered to the increasing warmth of his embrace. And then there came that wonderful, incredible, overwhelming moment when her own lips became hot and moist and clinging. Her arms tightened about him, her body grew tense and straining, her heart was pounding,—he could feel it,—and her breathing was short and quick.

Poor fool, he did not know that the woman in her was aroused, in spite of herself, by the man in him. He thought it was love,—the sudden, acute awakening of love,—and exulted. He had conquered,—his love had conquered! What he did not know,—how could he know?—was that she had surrendered not to him, but to herself, to the passion that had taken possession of her virile, clamorous body, rendering her powerless to think or to reason while under its luxurious spell.

If he could but see her now, at this very minute, standing before the fireplace, shivering and trying to warm an

icy body that but a short while ago had been hot with a riotous fire!

He began to take stock of himself all over again, now that the unexpected, the long desired thing had happened. She was going to marry him, she was going to be his wife. In the fall. At the end of her two years, no sooner. That would be in November. Six months to wait. They soon would pass. Six months! Then he would be king, he would put on his crown,—and she would be his queen. Kings! Ha, kings had done worse than he. They had deliberately, intentionally put men out of their way in the ruthless quest of women. History produces countless kings who slew for the sake of—aye, and queens too for that matter,—for the sake of love. Great kings, God-ordained kings, mighty in power and supreme over men! That is what kings, the lords of the earth, had done! And he,—what had he done? He had not killed in order that he might possess. He had not expected to gain by his deed. He had not done away with Bennie Jaggard so that he might, like the kings of old, complacently satisfy a peculiar form of avarice that began long ages before men took women to be their wives. No! That was not why he killed Bennie Jaggard,—and he asked God to bear witness to the truth of that.

Up at the house on the hill, long after his departure, Barbara stole quietly, cautiously into the bedroom of Benjamin the Third, careful not to awaken the nurse who slept soundly in her bed across the room. The light from the hall shone through the open door and fell upon the face of the baby in his crib. Countless nights she had done this very thing. Voicelessly she now apostrophized her offspring:

“It looks like desertion, baby. I suppose I am playing you a mean trick. Your name, poor little kiddie, will always be Jaggard. You can’t change it. It will stick to you forever. But, God bless your little heart, I will always

worship you because you are mine and you are called Bennie Jaggard. And yet, if there was a way, I'd give you another name to be used by all the rest of the world except me, so that you would not have to bear one that is hated and despised by those who knew your forebears. Good night, my lamb. See! I am crying. I am glad you are asleep."

Far in the sleepless night she suddenly thought: "I wonder—oh, I wonder, if it would be possible for me to give him the name of Playden too. I never thought of that. It has been done. Lots of children take the names of their step-fathers. Legally. It's done over and over again. I wonder if Rufus would let me give my baby his name. That would be wonderful. Then there would be no more Jaggards,—not one. My boy's children would be called Playden."

Hurdleford was thrilled and said, "I told you so." Shelby Wayne regained some of his old-time joviality and spirit; Judge Playden walked with a new springiness and there was a proud light in his keen old eyes; Doctor Higgs took it upon himself to suggest to Tom and Stella that if the baby they were expecting turned out to be a girl, she ought to be called Barbara Wayne,—absolutely; old Ike Moses sat up a little more erectly when he drove the Wayne span up and down Center Street and frequently got out and wore his ancient plug hat, even on the hottest of summer days; and Miss Hannah O'Leary, Latest Modes and Fashions, did a land office business from August to November.

Rufus Playden threw the cartridge crowned lead pencil into the river.

November came at last and they were married. Rufus put on his crown. He was king.

But there were no Waynes to witness his coronation. Barbara had stubbornly said: "I'll be a Jaggard till my name is changed."

The wedding took place at the house on the hill.

BOOK THREE

CHAPTER ONE

CHANGES

THE following Spring George Wayne sold out to his brother Tom and went to Detroit, where he had accepted a promising and responsible position in the engineering department of one of the great automobile factories. Close upon this surprising decision, Hurdleford sustained another shock: Tom Wayne discontinued the garage business and became district agent and distributor for the same popular and moderate-priced car that was being turned out by the company with which his brother was connected.

In place of the grimy, greasy, odoriferous garage where the two brothers had begun their careers in lowly fashion, there bloomed (so to speak) a spick-and-span "repository," with shining new cars standing in conspicuous and haphazard splendor about the floor, visible to all beholders through large plate-glass windows and teeming with opulence, arrogance and enticement. A few years before, Hurdleford would have shaken its doubting head and prophesied disaster for the young man; it would have said he couldn't make a "go" of it. But now the automobile was in the heyday of its expanding youth; it was dominant; it was ruling the road and the people who traversed it. The big cities and the rich of the land no longer were permitted to look with disdain or pity upon villager and farmer; horses that once had cavorted wildly and had to be clutched by the bit while wrathful owners told apologetic motorists what they thought of them, now eyed the monster with scarcely more than passing interest and shied only at dogs and threshing-machines. Motor-cars of high and low degree, silent or noisy, swift or otherwise, infested the land;

poor and shabby indeed was the farmer or the merchant who did not possess one. Where but a few years back the streets of Hurdleford,—and Hurdleford typified the nation,—were of clay or at best gravel, with chuckholes that no one minded because they kept the taxes down, now were macadam or brick pavements and the town council was likely to be turned out of office at the next election if it didn't "keep the streets up." Mud-roads, dirt-roads, one-time satisfactory "turnpikes" of shifting gravel, were rapidly giving way to solid highways on which one could do forty miles an hour without considering springs or spines. Suddenly the "backwoods" ceased to exist. The "rube" was fast becoming a thing of the past.

People bought automobiles and ran them who no longer ago than yesterday, it seemed, were careful about their dollars and their lives. They were the people who had argued that the horse,—the reliable old horse,—was good enough for them.

And so everybody said that Tom Wayne was a smart young fellow and took pleasure in owing him money for goods already received. The sign stretching along the whole front of the reconstructed building read: "Thomas Wayne. Automobiles, Accessories and Repairs."

First reports had it that George Wayne was receiving a salary of a hundred dollars a week up in Detroit. Well, he deserved it, said Hurdleford. A lot of money, but he was worth it. Hard-headed citizens wondered if Tom would do as well as that in his business. Subsequent rumors gave George two hundred dollars a week; barely a month elapsed before Charlie Jones, the city editor of *The Express*, called Tom up on the telephone to inquire if it was true,—as Johnson Q. Streamer swore it was,—that George was receiving twenty-five thousand a year and had been offered an "interest" in the concern.

As a matter of fact, George Wayne began work pretty

well down toward the bottom of the ladder and was getting fifty dollars a week to start with. He had been taking down more than that as his share of the profits in the Wayne Bros. Garage.

The two brothers had at last come to the parting of the ways. The situation was impossible. George took the initiative. He had waited long and loyally for Tom to come to him and bare his soul; he could not understand his brother's silence. Always in the past, ever since he was old enough to talk, in fact, Tom had gone to his big brother with his troubles, great and small; and that brother had never failed to understand and to help him. There was a well-remembered and ominous period when Tom was disposed to wildness. He was in scrape after scrape,—sometimes they bordered on the serious,—and always he took George into his confidence, accepted his advice and help, was even humbly grateful for the reproaches and the denunciations that generally fell to his lot before the steady older brother put his arm about his shoulder and told him not to worry, he would see him through; and when that year or two of reckless, joyous wildness gave way to sober manhood, he continued to make a practice of revealing his innermost thoughts and mental complications to George.

Now it was different and had been since the day of Bennie's murder. The wall that reared itself between them at that time showed no signs of crumbling. On the contrary, it seemed to have become absolutely impenetrable, shutting them off from one another even in the smallest and most trivial matters of a personal nature. They were surly, resentful,—and both knew why. Each longed for the other to unbosom himself as in the old days. At last there came a time when they began to hate each other. Not by word nor by deed was this feeling permitted to reveal itself in their relations; they were very careful about that, for they knew what would come of an open rupture.

Each one knew that he would accuse and denounce the other and that would be the end; there could be no half-way measures if the flare-up came.

So George, having reached the point when he could no longer be close to Tom without despising him, got out.

Besides, there was Kate Smith. She had been the wife of Dr. Schwartz not more than a month when George found temptation being put in his way. She was waiting for him on the bridge late one afternoon when he motored home. . . . She cried. . . . That was another reason for his leaving Hurdleford. He could not stand seeing Kate unhappy, even though he snarled at her when she confessed that she had never ceased loving him.

"Go home to Maxie," he had said, white-faced and bitter. "He's your husband. I asked you if you wanted to be released from your engagement. You took your choice. You said yes. You knew I loved you and you knew how it hurt to let you go. Maxie's a decent fellow. He didn't take you away from me. I'll be darned if I'll take you away from him, Kate."

"Don't you love me, George?" she had sobbed.

"That's got nothing to do with it," was his gruff reply. "I'm decent, that's all."

"Oh, if I'd had any sense,—if I only had it to do over again, I'd—— See here"—she broke off to demand, hotly—"do you mean to insinuate that I am not decent?"

"You're married, aren't you?"

"Yes, but—but I've made a horrible mistake. Listen, George! I—I simply can't go on living. That's all. I can't stand it. I love you. I can't go on living."

He pointed to an aperture in the side of the bridge.

"There's the river. If you feel that way about it, jump in. I'll promise not to leap in after you and pull you out. Good-by."

She had watched him drive away, shame in her eyes. Presently she threw up her head and started homeward.

"Well, anyhow, he knows," she was saying to herself. "He knows how it is with me."

A week or two passed. Then she began calling him up on the telephone, regardless of chance listeners at central. One day Dr. Schwartz, beamingly happy and glorified, invited George to come up and have Sunday dinner with him and Kate.

"I can't, Maxie. I'm going to have dinner with Stella and Tom," said George, experiencing an unaccountable guilt in the presence of Kate's husband. He knew that she had persuaded Max to ask him,—and he knew he was lying when he said he was going to Tom's.

"Kate will be terribly disappointed, George. She wants you to see how happy we are in our new home. We've got it all fixed up now,—slickest little place in town, if I do say so myself. She's awfully keen to have you see it. Can't you beg off? Stella won't mind if you——"

"I don't like to ask her to do it, Max. I'd rather not," broke in the other, uncomfortably.

"Look here, old boy, you haven't got any hard feelings toward me, have you? I know how it used to be with you and Kate, but that's all past and gone. I hope you haven't got it in for me or anything like that."

"Not at all, Maxie,—not at all. Not the least feeling in the world."

"I thought maybe you were sore or—or something. All's fair in love and war, they say," went on the bridegroom, sticking out his chest a little. "I wouldn't go so far as to say that the best man always wins but—you know what I mean, old boy. Ha! Ha! And I guess I'd be foolish to say that none but the brave deserve the fair, and all that sort of thing."

"Oh, you deserve her all right, Maxie."

"That's a good scout! I'm glad you think I deserve her, George. Look here, it would make Kate and me awfully happy if you'd come up and have supper with us Sunday

night if you can't come to dinner. She was saying only last night,—oh long after we'd gone to bed and I thought she'd been asleep, but she wasn't,—she was saying she did wish we could make you feel that you were welcome to drop in at our place whenever you felt like it. To show you what kind of a sport I am, I'll go so far as to say the oftener the better. Get me?"

"Sure. I get you."

"Well, Kate made me promise."

"Promise what?"

"Why, to get you up for dinner or supper on Sunday. For old time's sake, she said."

"I'm afraid I can't make it, Maxie. Not this Sunday, at any rate."

"All right, George,—we'll let it go at that," said Dr. Schwartz, and there was no mistaking the relief in his voice.

A day or two later, George had a long letter from her. In the postscript she commanded him "for heaven's sake" to burn it after he had read it. He did so,—not because he despised her but because he still loved her.

Tom accompanied him to the railway station on the day of his departure. They shook hands,—a long, firm grip that seemed to say: "All you have to do is to tell *me*, and no one else, and I'll stick by you till hell freezes over." And after the train pulled out, Tom said to himself: "The least he could have done was to thank me for taking the kicks with him. I would have thanked him,—right at the start,—and he knows I would. I'm glad he's gone. I just simply couldn't stand looking at him any longer."

Nevertheless, he had named his baby boy George Shelby Wayne.

Shortly after his eldest son's departure, old Shelby Wayne, desolate and unhappy over the turn of affairs, asked Barbara to come and see him at the old home. He was waiting for her one day at the mouth of the lane when she

drove out in the car on her way to "Sullivan's Three Hundred," where one of the young Mrs. Howards was down with a broken leg.

She told him where she was going and asked if he would care to accompany her. To her surprise, he said he would like nothing better. She was driving the car herself. He got in beside her.

Barbara had been married a little over six months. Her fine, strong face no longer reflected the sullenness that had filled her soul throughout the last few months of an existence as Mrs. Jaggard. It seemed a little more clearly chiseled, a shade more settled into womanhood, but if anything it was lovelier than ever before. He had noticed the change in her and was proud of her, proud that such a vivid, vital young thing was his daughter. But he was not deceived. He knew down in his heart how it was with her. She was Mrs. Playden now, not Mrs. Jaggard. And always he searched Rufus Playden's face for signs of disillusionment. He wondered how long it would be before he found out that Barbara had married him simply to be released from the grip of dead Jaggards. He would have been stunned,—and relieved,—if he had known the truth; he would have thought better of Barbara, his child.

Her cheeks were warm and brown from constant, untiring work in the open air. Her teeth gleamed whiter than ever between her clean-cut smilingly satiric lips and against the tan of her healthy skin.

"Seems to me you get better looking every day, Barbara Lee," said her father, breaking a silence that had lasted from the time he entered the car until they were passing his own front gate. "Nothing like happiness to bring out a person's good points."

"It all comes of having a good looking father," said she, banteringly. "I'm glad I haven't got an ugly one."

"Nonsense. Yes, there was a time not so long ago when

I thought you were beginning to look less like the Waynes than I'd counted on when you were a little girl. Seems to me you've changed a lot in the last six months."

"Since I changed my name to Playden, you mean, eh?"

"Well, I wouldn't put it just that way. Since you got married again and found happiness."

"There is an old saying that a wife grows to look like her husband after they've been married a long time,—but only in case they are very very happy and very much absorbed in each other."

He turned to her with a smile and a twinkle in his eye. "I am very fond of Rufus, but God knows he isn't a beauty."

"He has gained ten pounds," said she.

"It wouldn't make any difference if he had gained a hundred."

"I think he has a very strong, unusual——"

"Bless your heart, don't think I'm finding fault with Rufus's face. I don't want you to get to look like him, that's all."

"No fear of that," said she succinctly and without a smile.

"How is the baby?" he inquired, after a long silence.

"Your grandson?"

"Certainly," said he, flushing.

"He's fine. Walking all over the place and talking a blue streak. He's a perfect darling, dad." Her eyes were sparkling now; her nostrils spread a little with the deep breath she took.

"Rufus fond of him?"

"Oh, I'm sure of it. I'd hate him if he wasn't. He has taught baby to call him daddy."

"That's fine," said Shelby Wayne, and again lapsed into silence. Presently he said: "I'm pretty lonely down there since George went away, Barbara Lee. Just me and the two dogs left of the family, if you want to put it that way. And the dogs are getting old. They miss George as much

as I do, I guess,—and Tom too. I was wondering if you'd care to come down and see me once in awhile, now that I'm all alone."

He spoke haltingly, wistfully. He counted six automobiles at various distances ahead of them on the road before her reply came.

"Yes, father. I'll come. Whenever you want me," she said, without turning her head.

"Thank the Lord!" he exclaimed, the words bursting forth as if driven by an explosion. "Thank the Lord, my child! I was afraid to ask,—I was afraid you'd be as stubborn as I am and say no. I was afraid you'd say you'd come if I'd promise to come up there and see you."

"I'll not ask you to do that, father," she said, smiling at him as she took her right hand from the wheel and laid it on his forearm. "But I will come to see you,—and the dogs,—every day if you'd like me to do so."

"It would make me very happy, Barbara Lee," said he, setting his jaw hard and crinkling his eyes to keep back the tears. Something came up in his throat and he had to swallow hard several times before he could trust his voice again. Even so, it was exasperatingly husky and unsteady. "Cato and Duke will be glad to see you too,—and Ike Moses. We'll have a sort of a family reunion, we Waynes."

"We Waynes," she scoffed. "Cato and Duke and Ike Moses!"

His temper flared up suddenly. "They're better than Jaggards," he blurted out, purpling, and was at once sorry. "Oh, Lord! Forgive me, Barbara!"

She slowed the car down.

"There is only one Jaggard left, father," she said, turning to him, a frown in her dark eyes. "That little tad up there. And he won't be a Jaggard much longer."

"What do you mean by that?"

"I shouldn't have put it in that way. He will always be a Jaggard, of course. But he will not be one by name.

Rufus has consented to adopt him and give him his name."

"What!" gasped her father, staring hard.

"He will ask the court to legally give my boy the name of Playden."

"Bless my soul!"

"I asked him weeks ago to do it. He refused at first,—but now he agrees with me that it would be for the best. At first he said he couldn't bear the thought of robbing Bennie of the only thing that was left—his child's name."

"And he—he finally gave in?"

"Yes. He has got Bennie's wife and Bennie's lands,—in a sense, of course,—so why not have Bennie's boy? That will make it complete. It was my idea. In a few days there will be no more Jaggards."

He drew a deep breath. "Except dead ones," he muttered.

She waved her hand in a wide gesture, taking in all the acres in sight. Something like exultation was in her voice.

"Think of it, think how strange it will seem. Never again will all this land be owned by people named Jaggard. Wiped out, that's what you might call it. Wiped out."

"Wiped out?" he muttered, passing his hand over his lips. "By gad, it—it doesn't seem right. No, sir, it doesn't seem right."

"I thought you despised them!"

"I did, my dear,—that's true. When they were alive. But, by George, it isn't in me to despise dead men."

"Well, I do," said she, curtly.

"Including Bennie?"

"Bennie was a Jaggard by name only. He was his mother's child. He was not a real Jaggard."

"He wasn't, eh?" blurted out honest Shelby Wayne, fixing her with hard eyes. He weighed his words before going on. "I guess you're right about that. He played a trick that was too damned low-down for even a Jaggard."

She flushed hotly. It was on the tip of her tongue to re-

tort that he had played a trick conceived by a Wayne, but she bit her lip and kept back the words.

"Anyway, father, he paid for it," was all she could think to say and fell silent.

A long time afterward he shook his head as if putting something away from him, sighed deeply, and said:

"It doesn't help matters to call a rose by any other name, you know."

She smiled, quite gayly now. "Don't be disagreeable, father. And as for that, just think how pleased a cabbage would be if people called it a rose."

On their return from the Sullivan place, she got out of the car and for the first time in nearly four years set foot inside the house where she was born. Old Ike Moses hobbled up from the barn, rubbing his eyes; Lizzie Smith, Shelby's housekeeper and "hired-girl" of twenty years' standing, gaped and joyously implored the Lord to have mercy on her soul, not once but a dozen times during the brief time the unexpected visitor remained in the house; Cato and Duke barked, wagged their venerable tails and behaved like the silliest of puppies. A barnyard rooster with a deep bass voice began to crow for no accountable reason; he had never seen Barbara before in all his majestic life.

"You see?" exclaimed her father. "We've all come to life again, Barbara dear. We're all happy. Even that blamed rooster out there. Just listen to him!"

"I would like to go up to my old room, father, if you don't mind," she said abruptly, after a few minutes.

"All right. You know where it is. It's never been used since you went away. Run along,—I'll wait down here for you."

"Thanks," she murmured, and sped swiftly up the stairs.

Her eyes were red when she rejoined him a little later on. She did not tell him that her first act was to push open the window blinds in one of the windows and look up, as she had done many a night, to the house on the hill. On

those long-ago nights there always had been a light in Bennie's window,—a bright but secret light for her.

"I will come again soon, daddy," she said as she was leaving. He walked to the gate with her. Ike Moses, who had put on his old plug hat and the ancient blue cast-off swallow-tail coat that had been given him seventy years before by the Waynes who then owned him body and soul, shuffled along behind, bowing and smirking and mumbling.

"Give my best to Rufus and bring him along the next time you come, Barbara."

"Poor old Rufus," she said, as she settled herself behind the wheel. "He is in a most awkward position these days."

"You mean—about George and Tom?"

"Yes. But I've made it plain to him that I do not expect him to break off his friendship with them on my account."

"Yes, it's mighty awkward," said her father slowly.

"Well, good-by, dad! Good-by, Ike Moses!"

They watched the car until it turned into the lane at the top of the hill.

"Heigh-ho!" sighed Shelby Wayne, gustily.

"Yas, suh, Marse Shelby,—yas, indeedy, suh," said Ike Moses. And then as if realizing that he had not been sufficiently emphatic about it, he repeated with vigor: "Yas, *suh!* She suttinly am, suh, she suttinly am."

"Marse" Shelby noticed his servant's regalia for the first time.

"What the devil do you mean by putting on that hat and coat, Ike Moses?"

"Why, suh, Marse Shelby, suh, Ah done dress up a leetle 'caze Miss Barbara Lee she allus use to laugh fittin' to kill when she little girl so high ev' time Ah dress up like a niggah, suh."

"Like a nigger?"

"Yas, suh. Miss Barbara Lee she say she bet Ah mussa been a niggah way back in de dark ages, suh. Yaw! Yaw! Yaw!" He roared with laughter. "Yas, suh! She suttinly

wuz a cute chile. Ah mussa been a niggah sometime! Yaw! Yaw! Yaw! In de dark ages!"

Barbara was no nearer to loving Rufus Playden than she was on the night she deliberately proclaimed her readiness to marry him. She had not deceived him then as to her feelings and she was not deceiving herself now, albeit she consciously and perhaps dutifully encouraged him in the fatuous, triumphant belief that he had finally wrested her love away from its memory of Bennie Jaggard.

But he had not accomplished this pleasant miracle. Because she was submissive he thought he had overcome the obstacle she herself had confessed would always remain in his path. He throve on the fruits of an unexpected conquest; now he was satisfied that love such as his was not to be denied or resisted. He took what he was pleased to secretly call her surrender as something inevitable, something that was bound to come in the natural order of things. She had been his from the beginning. Bennie was a mere accident, an interlude, a fancy that needed only the reality of love to dispel. Rufus was very proud and very happy. She was his,—all his.

He carried his head high nowadays. His eyes were bright, his smile broad and genial; he was out of the depths. Barbara loved him,—so he loved the whole world. Something really worth while to work for now, some reason for reviving the ambition that had seen him through college and the law-school. Congress! Congressman Playden!

But he would have slunk off into the darkness, humiliated, disillusioned, even horrified if he had known that Barbara always put another man in his place when she submitted whole-heartedly to his caresses: Bennie Jaggard. An invisible but conveniently omnipresent Bennie embraced her; she never thought of Rufus at all when he was most sure of her. For the time being he became Bennie, the man she loved; he was always in her mind, a curiously vicarious substitute who made Rufus endurable. Only when she

kissed him perfunctorily, perhaps dutifully, were her thoughts of him. Nevertheless he believed he had won her completely away from the old love; he even went so far as to wonder if she could have loved Bennie at all! At any rate, he was glad that she had at last put Bennie out of her mind.

At first he had revolted against giving his name to Bennie's child. That was going a little too far,—a good bit too far. He wanted children of his own. He did not relish the idea of having Bennie Jaggard's boy bear the name that belonged only to his own children. But there was another side to the question and he came at last to recognize it, grudgingly at first and then with an acute eagerness. Barbara's frank proposal was additional proof of the change of heart that was so gratifying to him. He took it to mean that she was through with Bennie forever, that she was content to have done with him, even to the blotting out of his very name.

That was not the only reason, however, nor was it the real one, for his willingness to have this boy called Benjamin Playden. He did not want constantly to be haunted by the name of the man whose place he had taken. Moreover, he was not doing the child an injustice. If anything, he was doing him a favor. The name he had inherited from his dastardly father was not one to be proud of in the community. He would be doing the child no harm if he consented to wipe it out altogether and in its place give him the name his mother bore rather than the one his father had disgraced.

It was Rufus who drew up the papers and attended to the transfer of George's interest in the business to his brother Tom. He did more than that. Tom lacked fifteen hundred dollars of the amount agreed upon by the two brothers to close the deal and George was willing to accept his note, without interest or limitation as to time, in lieu of cash. Rufus went down to the bank and drew fifteen hundred

dollars out of his own meager store and pressed it upon the astonished Tom.

"George will need the money," he argued. "This is mine, boys, not Barbara's. You need not hesitate about taking it, Tom. I want to lend it to you as a friend and not as a brother-in-law. You understand that, don't you?"

"Sure. But why should you do it, Rufe? George here is willing to take my note. He knows I'll pay. He isn't worrying about that. Besides, this is a deal between us as brothers, old man. We can't——"

But Rufus would not be denied. "When it comes to that, am I not your brother now?" He laughed at their objections, overcoming their quite natural disposition to at first be offended, and prevailed upon the younger Wayne in the end to accept the cash, thus closing the transaction so far as the two brothers were concerned. If he had had his way about it, he would have declined to accept interest. But he did not suggest such a thing; his regard for Tom Wayne was too great, too sincere. An offer to forego interest on the loan could only have been taken as an insult. He agreed to accept five per cent and made the note out for a period of two years. Secretly, however, he resolved to one day present the accumulated interest to Tom's boy. He could not take pay from Tom Wayne.

When he told Barbara what he had done, she smiled and exclaimed:

"How good you are, Rufus. We Waynes owe you a lot, don't we?"

"It is nothing, my dear, to what I owe you Waynes," said he, and she took it as a tribute to herself.

True enough, he had put on ten pounds or more since been crowned king.) His lean, wiry figure had filled out a his coronation. (He always thought of himself as having little, he carried himself more erectly, and, without the investment of so much as a single dollar in new clothes, he seemed to have become prosperous-looking. Hurdleford did

him the injustice of saying that he could afford to dress better now and put on a few airs with all that money at his command. As a matter of fact, he never spent a penny of Barbara's money on himself.

In the first place, he could not, to save his soul, have used for his own account a dollar of Bennie Jaggard's money; even more than that, however, was a fine, old-fashioned—and in these days unparalleled—principle that would not allow him to be dependent upon his wife. He had rigid, inflexible ideas on the subject, and he carried them out, much to her dismay. She was given to understand in the beginning that the house would have to be run on just what his own personal income would justify. Out of his earnings,—and they were not large,—she was compelled, greatly against her wishes at first, to pay all of the household expenses; he did not object to her doing as she pleased when it came to the conduct of the farms and other outside interests, but he was adamant when it came to the household itself. He gave in to her on the question of her own wardrobe, the automobiles (she now possessed two), the service of the high-priced Miss Remster, and a hundred and one little personal extravagances,—but she had to *live* on his money, not Jaggard's.

"You're not like most husbands," she said to him one day at the end of a long argument in which she was surprised to find herself up against a stone wall.

He stroked her hair lovingly. "And you would enjoy nothing better than to be like most rich wives," he declared.

"What do you mean by that?"

"You would like to see your husband living in the luxury to which he is absolutely unaccustomed."

She pouted. "Won't you ever let me spend any money on you,—I mean, for you,—Rufus?"

"Oh, my goodness, yes!" he said, gayly. "If you can save anything out of the money I give you to run the house

with, darling, you may squander it on me to your heart's content."

Barbara did not hesitate to spend her money on herself and he saw no reason to object. In fact, he rejoiced in knowing full well that, despite her seeming extravagance, she was a hard-headed, singularly calculating person when it came to money. She spent a lot on clothes; she had furs, jewels and frocks for herself and smart things for the baby; she spared nothing in making the home attractive; yet she could drive a bargain shrewdly, intelligently and sometimes obstinately in all transactions pertaining to the estate. In this particular, she surprised him. There were times when he was forced to admit to himself that she was as "hard as nails," even niggardly. At such times he could not help noticing the hard light in her expressive eyes and the curious tightening of her lips. And the familiar little sardonic smile that had mocked him and others in bygone days occasionally made its appearance when least expected.

She was now recognized as a real figure in the town of Hurdleford and throughout the whole county as well. She was gracious and generous and enterprising. No public or private enterprise was complete without her presence or influence. The name of Mrs. Rufus Playden headed all the lists. Even such redoubtable leaders as old Mrs. Dr. Higgs, Mrs. Stidham, Mrs. Holmes, Mrs. Foster (the bank president's wife) and others, were content to take a figurative back seat for Mrs. Rufus Playden when they would not have given an inch to Mrs. Benjamin Jaggard. Was she not the daughter of one of the best-liked men in the county, wasn't she the wife of Hurdleford's most promising citizen, and wasn't she the richest and best-dressed woman in that neck of the woods? The transmogrification was bewildering.

Strange to relate, Hurdleford rather liked being looked down upon by her; it had loved her when she was Barbara Wayne, despised her when she was Barbara Jaggard, and now it was happy because she was Barbara Playden. It no

longer loved her, neither did it despise her. It took her for what she was worth.

People were convinced that she had driven her brother George out of town; they believed the position she had taken was responsible for the curious aging of Shelby Wayne; but they forgave her a good many things because she was making Rufus Playden happy. Nevertheless, they wondered how long she would keep up the practice of calling for him late every afternoon in the car, rain or shine, putting up frequently with waits of half to three quarters of an hour while he tarried over purely business matters in the office upstairs. Nor did Hurdleford like the way she treated Eva Joslin when that unfortunate lady stopped one day to speak to her while she was waiting at the curb for her husband. Eye-witnesses vouched for the fact that young Mrs. Playden first "looked a hole through" Eva and then turned her back on the honest woman who had gone into court to tell the truth about Bennie Jaggard. Several citizens who happened to be standing in front of Hedrick's cigar store at the time said they never had felt so sorry for anybody in their lives as they did for Eva.

Stidham's Bookstore, where she had clerked for over a year and was called Barbara by every one about the place from proprietor down to delivery boy, no longer had the hardihood to address her by her first name. Such familiarity as that was not to be thought of. Even Mr. Stidham said "Good morning, Mrs. Playden" or "What can we do for you to-day, Mrs. Playden?" To do her justice, she would not in the least have minded if all of them had continued to call her Barbara, but it did not occur to her to say to Mr. Stidham and Jennie Graves and Laura O'Farrall: "Oh, for goodness' sake, please call me Barbara! You call my husband Rufus, every last one of you, don't you? Well?"

She did not go to church. Up to the time she ran away with Bennie Jaggard she had been a faithful though not particularly devout member of the Rev. Mr. Davidson's

congregation, singing in the choir (which was interesting and amusing from a social point of view), and taking an active part in all of the church entertainments. But things were different now. Mr. Davidson was Tom's father-in-law. When Rufus asked her one Sunday if she would not go to church with him, she shook her head, smiled a bit sardonically and replied:

"No, thank you. I am an outsider, you know. Only the immediate relatives of the two families are expected." She spoke flippantly.

"That is ridiculous, my dear."

"So don't ask me again, Rufus," she said.

CHAPTER TWO

THE TEMPEST

THERE came a close, sultry evening in June when they sat together on the porch waiting for the breeze that was promised by the storm-clouds hanging in the west. It was still daylight, the hour when day begins to slip quickly, mysteriously into night. They had had their supper; the baby had been put to bed after half-an-hour's romp with his step-father; the rattle of pans and dishes came noisily through the open windows of the kitchen where Mrs. Robbins and the Hinkle girl were "clearing up."

They had spent the better part of the afternoon in Radley, where in Judge Gordon's chambers Rufus, in accordance with the requirements, had legally adopted Bennie Jaggard's son, giving to him his name.

Barbara was tired, listless. Not even on the busiest of days had she appeared to be so exhausted by heat and fatigue,—and there was no day in which she neglected her duties and activities as mistress of the seemingly endless farms that stretched away as far as the eye could reach. Her eyes were dark, brooding, dull; the chair rocked slowly, almost unnoticeably propelled by one outstretched heel, her other leg being thrown over the low arm of the rocker in unaccustomed abandon. She was silent, had been for a long time, as if the energy required for speech was wanting; her gaze was fixed straight before her on—nothing.

He too was silent, smoking. His hair was wet, his usually colorless cheeks pink and perspiring after his rough-and-tumble play with one blissfully undaunted by the heat.

Suddenly she spoke. There was finality, decision in her voice. She did not look at him but kept her eyes fixed on

the somber clouds that were fast losing shape in the murk of night that was falling upon the land.

"I don't want to have any more children, Rufus."

He started. His hand stopped half-way to his lips, gripping the pipe rigidly.

"What's that?" he demanded, blankly.

"Of course, I shall do as you wish about it," she went on. "I'll be fair. But I don't want to have any more children."

Neither spoke for many minutes.

"You mean you do not want children of mine to share your love and affection with Bennie Jaggard's boy?" he said at last, his voice far steadier than he thought he could make it.

"I am only wondering whether it would be fair to your children, Rufus."

"Let's get it straight. You couldn't love them as much as you do little Bennie?"

"I don't mean that, at all. Of course I should love them. It wouldn't be the same, however."

"Well, you—you are honest, to say the least," he said, with a twisted smile.

"Here is the real reason, Rufus. You could not help loving children of your own more than you would love Bennie. It would be only natural. It would be different with me, of course. Just think a minute. They would be mine. I would be their mother just as I am Bennie's. But how would it be with you? Bennie is not yours. You love him now because there is no other. You know as well as I do that *all* of your love would be for your own children if we have any. Don't you see what I mean? Bennie would be an outsider, an alien, no matter how hard you tried to be fair. You couldn't help it. I couldn't bear that, Rufus. I couldn't stand not having him loved. You hated his father."

"Don't you think you're rather selfish, dear?" he said quietly, after a few moments.

"I dare say I am," she sighed.

He was silent again for awhile. "Suppose I insist, Barbara."

In the gathering gloom he caught the flash of her teeth as she smiled up at him.

"In that case," she said, ironically, "there would be nothing left for me to do but to pray to God."

He laughed shortly, harshly. "Humph!" he grunted. Then: "Funny you put off thinking about this until after we had changed Bennie's name to mine."

"That had nothing to do with it," she exclaimed in genuine surprise.

He made no response to this, and she left him a few minutes later, saying she was tired and wanted to get out of her clothes and into bed. A coolish breeze had sprung up. The storm was nearer. As she passed his chair, she stopped and laid her hand on his head.

"I'm sorry, Rufus," she said, more gently than was her wont.

"That's all right, Barbara," he cried, coming out of the fit of abstraction into which he had fallen. "Don't think anything more about it, dear. Your happiness is the thing I want most of all."

"I'm a beast," she broke in. "You're too good for me."

"Wait a second," he urged, catching her hand as she started to hurry away. "A long time ago I said to myself I'd be willing to spend all eternity in hell if I could have you for a few years beforehand. I would be content with a brief stay in heaven if I could have it in that way. You are all I want. I'll be satisfied with you alone, Barbara."

He smiled up at her, the light from a window falling on his wistful and, to her, strangely haggard face.

"So we'll both pray to God, old girl."

Long afterward he slipped cautiously into the house and

stood at the foot of the stairs listening. As he had suspected, she was up in the baby's room. He could hear the nurse out on the opposite porch, rocking idly in the coolth that stole up from the west.

"She's right," he muttered between stiff lips. "I would hate that child even more than I hate him now and she would love him more than ever. If we had a dozen, she would still love this one the most. But to me he would be a bastard child,—Bennie Jaggard's bastard. To save my soul, I can't think of him as anything else. I thought of him as a bastard before he was born. God, how I hate him! Sometimes he looks at me out of those baby eyes of his as if he knew everything. I wonder—I wonder if Bennie's soul could have flown to Barbara the night I—the night he died,—to find its way into the body of the child that was not to be born for weeks to come. That's a devil of an idea! What could have put it into my head all of a sudden? Maybe that's why he looks at me so strangely sometimes. Times when I have to turn my head away to keep from—— Oh, but good Lord, I *couldn't* strike him!"

He shuddered a little, wiped his moist forehead, and went back to the porch. For a long time he stood leaning against a post, his cold pipe in his hand, staring out into the darkness toward the little Jaggard graveyard.

"God, that's a horrible notion,—a horrible thought," he found himself muttering. "Bennie isn't down there in that grave. He's upstairs in that baby." He felt his knees sag under him. He stiffened them instantly with an effort. "You blamed fool!" he mumbled, looking over his shoulder, uneasily. "Of course, it isn't so. It can't be so."

Again, after a long time,—he had relighted his pipe with trembling fingers,—he mused: "I couldn't help noticing the way he looked at me this afternoon. Turned his head and looked at me and—I swear to God, he looked astonished,—yes, sort of as if all of a sudden he realized what was happening. The queerest look. Only for a few seconds.

Straight into my eyes. Just after Judge Gordon said his name was henceforth to be Benjamin Playden. They didn't seem like baby eyes just for a second or two."

He wiped his forehead,—and laughed nervously. It was wet. A strong, cool wind was blowing. He was no longer hot. Yet his forehead was wet.

He heard some one closing the windows. The forgotten storm was upon him, suddenly, unbelievably. Those noiseless flares of lightning he remembered seeing a long time ago off in the southwest, the mutterings of thunder he had heard, seemed instantly to have become vicious, peremptory. The first splatter of rain fell upon the tin roof of the porch; a mighty gust of wind rushed through the cedars, bending them, smiting him in its gleeful fury; then the roar and swish of driven water, the carnage and clash of a great battle sweeping overhead through the night. He shrank back into a sheltered corner, flattened himself against the wall, safe from wind and rain, and watched the storm.

How long he stood there he did not know. A light suddenly burst from the windows; a moment later the door was flung open. Barbara stood there, peering out into the flashing, turbulent night. The rush of wind against her body seemed curiously to disrobe her, to strip her of the pink, flimsy peignoir she was holding tightly at the neck; glued to her tall, perfectly molded figure, pink as the flesh itself, it was as if the garment did not exist at all. She made him think of pictures he had seen. . . .

He opened his lips to call out to her but held back the cry when he saw that she was looking straight before her in the direction of the graveyard. Her head was bent forward, slightly turned in the attitude of one listening intently for some sound that was not of the storm. After a moment or two, he spoke to her. She did not turn her head.

"Is that you, Rufus?" she flung over her shoulder.

"Yes. Better get inside, dearest. It's a fearful storm. What are you doing——"

"Was it you who called to me a few minutes ago?" she demanded, still without looking at him.

"No. When was——?"

"I am sure I heard some one calling my name. Three times. 'Barbara—Barbara—Barbara.' Three times. It was some one outside the house. Are you sure you didn't——"

"I am positive." He crossed over to her and laid his hand on her arm. "It must have been the wind. Or you imagined—— Why, you're shaking like a leaf! Come inside."

"I can't help thinking there is some one out there in the storm,—calling to me."

"Nonsense! I would have heard, wouldn't I?"

She suffered herself to be led into the house. He closed the door.

"There is no one out there, Barbara," he insisted, but he was strangely pale. "Have you been in bed?"

"No. I was sitting in the window, watching the storm come up." She looked at him quickly. "Have you been out there on the porch all this time?"

"Yes."

He did not detect the odd, cunning gleam in her eyes nor did he note the change in her voice when she said:

"I thought it was you calling to me. I was afraid something had happened to you. I knew you were out there—at least, I thought you were,—and I was terribly afraid something had happened——"

"Imagination, my dear," he broke in, tweaking one of the long braids that hung down over her breast. "I love to watch a storm. Especially at night. I'm all right. Perfectly all right."

"As right as rain, as the English say," she said, forcing a laugh that was meant to be gay.

"As right as rain," said he, waving his hand toward the windows. "At the same time I'm glad I'm not out in it. Lord, how it's pouring!"

"It's funny about rain, isn't it, Rufus. It rains on the just and the unjust without the least discrimination, doesn't it?" She was still smiling.

"My father says the unjust always have the umbrellas they've never returned to the just," said he, with a grimace.

"I'll bet you've never borrowed an umbrella in your life, if that's the case."

His lip twisted a little. "None so blind as him who will not see. Look all about you, my dear, and see the umbrella I'm under at this minute." He waved his hand spaci-ously.

"But you didn't borrow it."

"I hope you're not accusing me of stealing it," he cried, with mock indignation.

There was a particularly loud, venomous crash of thunder at that instant. She put her hands to her ears.

"Goodness! That struck somewhere near, I'll bet. Oh, I forgot the baby! I wonder if he's awake and—scared! Come on! Turn off the lights. And come to bed, Rufus,—right away. I'm afraid. I really am afraid. I——"

"I'll be up in a minute or two. Where's Miss Remster?"

"In a closet," she scoffed from the stairway.

He went out on the porch again, pulling the door shut behind him with an effort. He heard the tongue of the lock catch, making it secure against the furious wind. The storm was at its height. Tremendous, appalling peals of thunder in almost unbroken succession; blinding flashes of lightning ripping through the dense wall of water,—he staggered and fell back against the wall, unable to stand upright against the mighty wrath of wind that suddenly swirled into the sheltered porch. But his eyes were wide open, staring down through the cedars toward——

The door flew open with a bang. He leaped to the opening and stumbled inside, almost falling to his knees,—as if he had been pushed or hurled out of the path of some powerful, resistless body. The wind gave forth a wild, gleeful

shriek as it swept past him. Dazed, bewildered by the uncanny sensation, he seized the door and forced it shut, bolting it as he braced it with his shoulder. The whole house seemed to be rocking.

"God! Who was that?" he gasped in terror. His wild eyes searched the room for the intruder. He was alone. To his amazement, he was alone; there was no one else in the room,—and yet he would have sworn he had been thrust violently aside by some one dashing in from the porch. Even as the words fell from his lips, the most savage, horrific crash of lightning came, splintering, rending, as if the whole world was being ripped like a piece of cloth. He swayed, staggered away from the door, momentarily stunned and about to fall.

A long, wailing scream came from upstairs. His heart gave a mighty thump, dread filled his soul. For a few seconds he stood still, grasping the edge of a table. Then with a cry he did not know he uttered, he rushed across the room to the hall and bounded up the narrow staircase, alarm lending wings to his feet. The door to the baby's room was wide open, banging against the wall, a perfect tornado of wind sweeping through it from the opposite side. There was no light in the room. He was terror-struck, convinced that the house had been struck by lightning and that Barbara had been killed. He expected smoke and flame to burst forth at any second,—that would mean inevitable destruction to the house and every one in it unless——

But there was no fire,—only the furious rush of wind through open windows.

The light from the hall fell directly upon a most appalling thing: the limb of a tree, sticking far into the room, its leaves snapping and whipping in the wind!

As he stared, dumb and incredulous, the other window gave way with a crash and the leafy end of a second limb slowly, as if propelled by some mighty hand, pushed its way into the room. It seemed to him as he watched that it would

never stop coming, that it would soon fill the whole room and reach over far enough to drive him back from the door.

He realized in a second what had happened. The lone oak tree that for a century had stood on that side of the house, alien among a smug tribe of cedars, had been struck by that devastating bolt; its shivered limbs, driven by the tempest, had crashed down upon the roof and side of the house, forcing their way through the window casements into the room.

Water was pouring in; he felt it splashing in a fine, sharp spray against his face, and he was fifteen feet away.

His heart stood still. He was stupefied, rooted to the spot. A sickening catastrophe had—There! Something was moving on the floor near his feet. He leaped back, seized by a momentary impulse to flee from the ghostly, horrible thing that appeared to be creeping toward him out of the shadow. Almost instantly his courage threw off the shock of cowardice and he sprang forward, seizing the limp, groping object in his arms,—the drenched, pink figure of Barbara.

Suddenly, for him, the crash and clatter of the storm ceased. He heard nothing save his own cries and the gasps that came from her lips as he staggered out into the hall with his burden. Without knowing what he was doing, he started for the stairway, his only thought being to get her out into the yard before the roof came down upon them. He had reached the top step when she uttered an agonized shriek and struggled out of his arms.

"The baby!" she shrilled. "Where is my baby? Bennie! Baby! Oh, my God! What has happened? Let go of me, you—you damned fool! Let go of——"

He was holding her tightly.

"You can't go back there, Barbara! Listen to me,—you can't go——"

"He is there,—in his room! Let go of me, I say!"

"I'll get him!" he shouted. "Stay here! Don't follow me! Do you hear? Don't—oh, my God!"

She had sagged limply in his arms, apparently lifeless. An instant later she recovered and began fighting for release. He heard himself shout "Thank God!" as he roughly hurled her to one side and dashed back into the room; he heard himself bawling "Bennie,—Miss Remster,—Bennie!"

The baby's crib was completely lost under a mass of wet, swishing foliage and branches that fought back viciously as he tried to tear his way through the obstruction. He heard Barbara scream:

"Not there! He is not in the crib!"

Whirling, he beheld her dragging herself through the door on her hands and knees. At the same moment his eyes fell upon a dim, grayish bundle over against the wall to the right of the doorway.

"Where is he? I had him in my arms. I was trying to get out of the room with him when the—— Where is he, Rufus?" she cried out piteously. "Ah!"

The last was a long-drawn sigh and wail combined.

"Oh, God in Heaven,—is my baby dead?"

She struggled to her feet as he darted past her with the bundle in his arms.

"I've got him!" he shouted. Turning, he threw his free arm about her and dragged her after him as he staggered to the stairs. "Miss Remster!" he yelled. "Where the hell is that woman?"

He never knew how they got to the bottom. All he knew was that the storm was raging again after a period in which, to him, there had been no sound save the moans of Barbara. He was sure of one thing: the baby was dead. Barbara was alive,—vigorously alive,—struggling to wrench his burden away from him. Suddenly there were other people in the sitting-room:—Mrs. Robbins and the Hinkle girl in their nightdresses, and Miss Remster picking herself up at the foot of the stairs.

"Telephone for Dr. Higgs," he cried out. "Quick! And we must get out of here."

He would not release the baby to its mother until the women screamed that they were afraid to telephone,—they would be killed by the lightning. Then he pushed Barbara into a chair and thrust the limp, warm bundle into her arms. Leaping to the telephone he jerked down the receiver and, without waiting for Central's response, shouted that he wanted Dr. Higgs' number instantly. Seconds,—they seemed minutes,—passed without a word from Central. Then he realized that something had happened to the telephone,—it wasn't working, the wires were down, he could not reach the doctor!

Mrs. Robbins was saying something close to his ear. He finally made it out.

"The big tree was struck! It must have pulled the wire down. No use——"

He flung the receiver down and cursed. Barbara was crying dully, weakly, as she sat bolt upright and strained the baby close to her breast:

"What will Bennie say? His baby's dead. I allowed his baby to be killed! What will Bennie say?"

His head cleared. A swift inspiration took the place of confusion in his brain.

"Give him to me," he commanded sharply. "I'll get him to a doctor. Quick! Let go of him! Maybe he's only stunned. How are you, Barbara? Are you all right? For God's sake, say you are all right? Listen! I'll get him down to Doc Carter's in no time. Higgs is too far away." He had taken the baby from her unresisting arms. She gazed up at him blankly. "Throw something over him, Miss Remster, so's he won't get wet—that mackintosh of mine. Hurry up! Why, he's warm! He's——"

His joy was cut short by Mrs. Robbins' mournful groan: "He ain't had time to get cold yet!"

"You're never going out in all this storm with that baby," cried the nurse, aghast.

"What else is there to do?" he almost snarled. "I've got to get him to a——"

"Wait a second," she broke in, suddenly the trained, clear-headed professional. "Let me see!"

She peered at the baby's face and saw that his eyes had rolled up. At the same time she was running her hands over him swiftly. She searched for his pulse. The little arm was stiff. His cheeks were queerly green and——

"You'll have to hurry," she said in a low tone. "I am afraid he's gone. I may be wrong,—I hope I am. Get him to the doctor. He will——"

"You look after Mrs. Playden," broke in Rufus. "Take care of her. See if the house is on fire,—quick! If it is,—make for the barn, all of you."

"What are you doing?" cried Barbara, starting up. "Where are you going with Bennie's baby, Rufus?"

He did not answer. Miss Remster pushed her back down into the chair and threw her arms around her as Rufus dashed out of the door, bareheaded, his burden wrapped in the mackintosh.

The rain was coming down in sheets; deafening peals of thunder followed close upon blinding flashes of lightning,—but he did not hesitate. He plunged out into the thick of it and, running with the wind behind him, fairly hurtled around the corner of the house and into the sloping orchard path,—the short-cut he knew so well. He shot a glance over his shoulder, and was relieved to find that the house was not ablaze. After the first reckless dash into the orchard, guided by the brilliant flares of light that split the darkness, he ran cautiously, guarding against collision with the low-limbed apple-trees, even stopping now and then to wait for the helpful flash. He was drenched to the skin; the wind seemed to be driving the rain through to his very bones.

against him, almost knocking him down. At that moment his wife appeared at the top of the stairs with a lighted candle. He slammed the door and——

"Where the—doc-tor?" wheezed a hoarse voice.

"Here I—— Why, Playden! What's happened? Lord, man! You're wet through and through!"

Water was streaming from the strange, swaying figure, forming puddles on the floor.

"Baby,—lightning,—hurry up, Doc," gasped Rufus, holding out the glistening mackintosh. "You've got—to—save him."

Carter did not hesitate. He took the wet, dripping bundle in his arms, shouted to his wife to hurry down with the light, and dashed into his office. Mrs. Carter, hurrying down the stairs, beheld a most alarming thing. The unrecognizable, bedraggled man in the hall below, staggering to the door, threw his weight against it and turned the key.

"Some one following me,—out there," he sputtered over his shoulder. "Keep him out. Don't let him in."

She stopped short, holding the candle above her head, and peered at the strange visitor.

"Why,—Rufus Playden!"

"Listen!" he cried, mastering his voice. "Telephone Doctor Higgs. Tell him to go up to Barbara. Right away. She's hurt. I don't know how badly. Lightning struck tree. Please, Mrs. Carter,—please hurry."

"Oh,—good heavens! Struck by lightning? Barbara?"

"Stunned. Shock. I don't know. Oh, I forgot," he broke off, moving away from the door. "It's dangerous to telephone. I'll do it myself. Where is the——"

As she darted past him into the office, she cried:

"Doctors' wives can't afford to be afraid of lightning, Rufus."

"Th-thanks," he muttered, rubbing his eyes with the back of his hand, trying to rid them of the water that was blinding him.

He followed her into the room, stumbling over the mackintosh that had been cast aside by the doctor, who by this time had the baby on a couch in the back office.

"Dry as toast," he was saying as Rufus stopped in the doorway and leaned against the jamb for support.

"Is he dead?" came from stiff lips.

The doctor did not answer. He was busy. In the outer room Mrs. Carter was calling central on the telephone. Rufus watched the doctor with fixed, staring eyes, seeing through the veil of water that still glazed them.

"Is he dead?" he repeated after a long time.

"Tell me what happened," said the doctor, without looking up. He was working over the limp, motionless body. "I am afraid he's gone. I'll do the best I can,—— Was he struck?"

Rufus managed to tell what he knew, jerkily, rather incoherently.

"And she's up there now,—I don't know how she's getting along. Maybe she's dying," he concluded, wiping his mouth. "I'll have to go back. I'll have——"

Mrs. Carter was speaking to him. "I got Doctor Higgs. He's starting at once. Good gracious, Rufus! You're wringing wet!" She leaned forward and looked at the baby. "Oh, poor little darling!" Then she burst into tears.

Rufus sighed as if with his last breath. "Then,—he's gone, Doc?" he whispered.

"Take him away, Lou," snapped the doctor to his wife. "Let me alone. There may be a chance. Maybe there's a spark left." He was working feverishly, his voice trailing off into inarticulate mutterings.

Suddenly Rufus began to shiver. His teeth chattered. Mrs. Carter flew to a closet across the room, returning in a few moments with a bottle and a tumbler.

"Drink this," she commanded, filling the glass almost to the brim. "Do as I tell you, Rufus!"

She had been his school-teacher when he was a boy. He

remembered well that tone of voice. More than once she had ordered him in that sharp, imperative tone to hold out his hands for a rapping with the ruler,—and once she had trounced him soundly with a birch gad. He was afraid of her in those olden days; he was astonished to find himself afraid of her now,—and she was quite a frail little woman at that.

He gulped down the whisky, shuddering and choking. He tried to speak and couldn't.

"You must get out of those wet clothes this instant," she was crying, almost harshly. "There's nothing you can do here. Come with me!" Snatching up the candle her husband had thrown aside, she lighted it from the other one and grasped Playden by the arm. He resisted for a moment and then suffered himself to be led away.

"I'm all right," he protested, hoarsely. From the door he cried: "Save him, Doc! Pull him through,—for God's sake! You've *got* to—do you understand?—you've got to."

She almost dragged him up the stairs and into a bedroom.

"I'll go back and help Frank," she was saying, "You'll find a suit of clothes in that closet, and other things in that bureau over there. Take everything off, do you hear? Every last stitch. You ought to get into bed—but you won't, I know. So get into dry clothes,—socks and everything. There are his slippers beside the bed."

She was gone, leaving the candle on the bureau-top. He began hurriedly, recklessly to divest himself of the wet, clinging garments. They were like ice. No wonder I'm shivering, he thought. His gaze fell upon a little clock on the mantelpiece. Ten minutes to eleven. He blinked. It couldn't be right. The hall clock at home had struck half-past ten just before the great crash came. He remembered hearing it—and then the crash. Was it only twenty minutes ago that—— But he was wasting time. Damn the clock!

When he looked at it again, the minute hand was nearing the hour. So it *was* going! He was pulling on the doctor's trousers. His own soggy clothes were lying in a heap on the hearthstone. Only five minutes! It seemed like an hour. What had happened downstairs in that unbelievable five minutes? No matter! One way or the other, it was over. Bennie was alive or he was stone dead. Grabbing up the coat, he rushed from the room, struggling into it as he descended the stairs. His teeth were still chattering.

At the foot of the steps he halted, listening intently for sounds outside the front door. His eyes were fixed on the doorknob, distinguishable in the faint glow of light that struggled out from the back office. He could have sworn he saw the knob turning,—but there was no sound. In fact, it was grewsomely, unaccountably still out there in the night. There was no thunder, no swish of driven rain, no wail of the wind,—only a curious, dead stillness. Moved by a sudden, irresistible impulse, either of fear or of courage (he knew not which), he leaped forward, turned the key and threw open the door.

"Is there anybody out here?" he challenged, loudly.

No answer,—not a sound save the rustle of leaves in the trees and the drip of water from the eaves. His eyes squinted in a futile effort to penetrate the darkness.

"Speak up! Anybody here?" Then he drew back, closing the door slowly. His mouth seemed to fill with ice-water. "God, I wonder if he got what he came for and has gone back up there to the——"

A hand was laid on his arm. He started violently.

"Come in here, Rufus," she was saying. "Frank thinks he is coming round. He's alive. His heart's beating and——"

"By gosh!" burst joyously from Rufus's lips. "Oh,—by gosh!" It was as if he were a boy again, all of a sudden. He could express himself only as a boy,—as an exuberant, happy boy. Later on, as he stood beside the doctor,

he became a man once more and humbly murmured: "Thank God! Oh,—thank God!"

Dully, as from a great distance, he heard the calm, matter-of-fact voice of the doctor, who was still bending over the naked little body.

"He didn't have any pulse at first. At least, I couldn't find it. But it's beating now. Mighty faint but—well, it's better than not at all. He's got a chance, a mighty good one. Something like a miracle, Rufe,—absolutely. Sort of scares a fellow, this does. Beyond belief. Shows there is a God. . . . 'wonders to perform' and . . . Why, this baby was as dead as a door-nail when—— Look at that! He's breathing! See the slobber at the corners of his—— Listen to that! Stronger every second! Here, Lou! Put your hand right here. Get it? Stronger, ain't it?"

"Is he going to live?" whispered Rufus, gripping the foot of the table.

"Sure he is," cried the doctor. He looked up at Playden. "You got him here just in time, Rufe. A few seconds longer and it would have been too late. I thought it was too late as it was. By gad, I—— Hey! Catch him, Lou!"

Rufus was reeling, his knees were giving way under him, when the doctor's little wife threw her arms around him and held him up. But, to their amazement, he was grinning foolishly, sheepishly.

"I—I guess it's the whiskey," he murmured. "I forgot all about it. And, say, Doc, I don't give a whoop what happens to me now. I saved him. That's good. That's great."

He sat down heavily in the chair to which Mrs. Carter backed him, over in the corner. He felt like cheering.

Meanwhile, up at the house on the hill they were having a hard time with Barbara. It was all the nurse and Mrs. Robbins could do to restrain her when Rufus rushed away with the baby. She was determined to follow him out into the tempest. Finally they succeeded in quieting her down

to the extent that she agreed to wait until Dick Carr could fetch the automobile around and she herself be got into a few clothes. She became strangely calm and self-contained.

"Run out to the barn and call Dick, Lily," she ordered, straightening up and speaking peremptorily.

"In—in all this rain?" gasped the Hinkle girl, involuntarily lifting her nightgown and drawing it close about her knees, as if she actually was about to step into a puddle.

"Do as I tell you," commanded Barbara, sharply. "Tell him to get the car out immediately. Go up and close that door, Mrs. Robbins. The wind's blowing a gale through it. And the water will come through and ruin——" she glanced up at the ceiling. "Don't stand there like a fool, Lily! Skip! I am going to Dr. Carter's. Don't argue, Miss Remster. My mind's made up. I'm all right. Run up to my room and get a dress for me. Needn't bother about a hat. And while——"

"You must not go out in this storm," pleaded the nurse. "You shall not!"

"Oh, I sha'n't, eh?" she sneered. "We'll see. And while you're about it put on some clothes yourself. You may be needed down there at the doctor's."

Her voice was hard and level. Already she was twisting her disordered hair into a braid preparatory to coiling it about the crown of her head.

"I've never seen any one like her," said Miss Remster to Mrs. Robbins in the hall upstairs a moment or two later. "Hysterics one minute and as cool as ice the next. If she thinks I'm going out in this storm she's jolly well——"

"Better put on some clothes," interrupted the housekeeper. "You'll be going with her if she says so, all right. Oh, Lord! What a mess it is in there!"

Left alone, Barbara strode to a window and looked out.

The only light in the room issued from the big oil lamp she herself had lit when she came downstairs the first time,

knowing by experience that the electric power soon would be shut off. There were vivid, appalling flashes outside, but she did not shrink, she did not draw back. With every flash she tried to pierce the wall of water that hung like a curtain between her and the clear space among the cedars through which the lonely little Jaggard graveyard was always visible. Her thoughts were bitter.

"I guess I deserve it," she was groaning down in her soul. "I am mean and selfish and—this is what I get. First Bennie, and now his child. They would both be alive if it were not for me. I killed Bennie,—that's what I did. And even worse than that, I've put scorn upon his memory. I've tricked him. So God takes his boy away from me. God snatches him out of my arms and—no, God smote me and I dropped him, so it is I who have killed him. He heard what I said to Rufus to-night. He heard me tell Rufus that I wouldn't——"

Something white and ghostly floated up from the yard onto the porch. She stiffened with horror, and uttered a little scream as the door flew open.

"Dick'll be here in a couple o' minutes," sputtered the Hinkle girl. "Goodness, I'm drowned! Just look at the water running all over the rug and——"

"Oh, Lily! You poor girl," cried Barbara, dismayed. Instantly the generous, warmhearted side of her succeeded the hard and domineering. She threw her arm about the dripping figure of the girl and hurried her toward the dining-room. "You must get out of that thing at once. You are sopping wet. You poor thing! I shouldn't have sent you out in——"

"Oh, that's all right, Barbara," broke in the Hinkle girl, kindling with pleasure. "It wasn't anything."

"Anyhow,—thank you, Lily," and the Hinkle girl raced away feeling that it would not have mattered if it had been

fire instead of water, she would have gone through it just the same for Barbara Wayne.

Fifteen or twenty minutes later, Barbara swept into Dr. Carter's house. Instinctively, she ran to the little back office, Mrs. Carter was holding the baby in her lap, all wrapped up in warm blankets. Barbara passed swiftly by the sagging, huddled figure in the corner without so much as a glance.

"Oh, Mrs. Carter," she cried, dropping to her knees beside the woman. "Tell me,—tell me?"

"For goodness' sake! What are you doing here? Didn't Dr. Higgs——"

"Oh, he's alive! Give him to me,—give him to me!"

Dr. Carter intervened. "Now, now, Barbara! Take it easy. He'll be all right,—believe me. Only you musn't touch him yet. Control yourself. It's still nip and tuck. I think I can assure you that——"

"Oh, thank you, thank you, Dr. Carter," she cried. "I'll be good. I'll be patient. Just don't let him die. I could never forgive myself. Oh, if you will only give him back to me! I can never thank you enough for——"

"Don't thank me, Barbara," interrupted the doctor gently. "Thank him," pointing to the slumping object in the corner. "Rufus saved him. If he hadn't got him here when he did—well, you can thank him, that's all."

Her gaze went to Rufus, whose dull, half-open eyes were upon her. His arms hung limp at his sides, his chin was almost touching his chest, his head was wobbling in a vain effort to lift itself out of the stupor into which his whole being had sunk.

Quickly, impulsively she rose to her feet and went to him, taking his face between her hands and raising it to look into his bleary eyes. There was horror in her own.

"Rufus! What is the matter? Are you——"

"He's all right," said the doctor, and then added face-

tiously, for he was in rare good humor: "He fell off the water wagon a little while ago. The Lord knows he was on it when he got here with this baby."

She sank down, clasping Rufus's knees in her arms.

"Good old Rufus," she murmured. "You are always doing something for me and I—I never have done anything for you. But I will,—yes, I will."

CHAPTER THREE

RUFUS MAKES GOOD HIS ESCAPE

A BRIGHT sun shone on Hurdleford the next morning; it smiled but had no answering smile. The night just gone had taken its toll under cover of blackness. True, no lives were to be counted among the things lost, but there was devastation and dismay on every side. Trees were down, sheds and barns unroofed, telephone poles and wires leveled in twisted masses, grain-fields blighted, cellars inundated, windows smashed, live stock killed, and three dwellings destroyed by fire shot down from the reveling clouds, all in a mad, drunken orgy of the gods who disported for half-an-hour and then went to sleep. Old inhabitants, viewing the havoc with eyes that had seen hurricanes come and go, proclaimed this to be the worst they had ever known. Uncle Jimmy Geer, aged ninety-two, recalled a tornado when he was a small boy that undoubtedly would have caused more damage to Hurdleford than this one if there had been any Hurdleford at the time.

That was the storm, he said, that blew down all those trees up yander in Ketcham's Grove,—“you've seen all them rotten logs, ain't you, layin' around every which way? Well, that was the storm. Back in 1830, I think it was. We was livin' in a shanty just this side of where the bridge is now. The only other hut was Tim Quinn's. Nobody ever see hide or hair of them two shanties after the storm was over. Pap was a smart man. He was what you might call a prophet. Terrible religious man. Him and God knowed what was coming, so he tuck Ma and us three children down to Black Turtle's Cave an' there we was safe. As I was sayin', if there had been as many houses in Hurdleford then as

there is now you'd have danged soon found out it was a wuss storm than this here one last night. 'There'd ha' been just that many more houses to blow to kingdom come an' ——" And so on without end, no one paying enough attention to Uncle Jimmy to even interrupt him.

The house on the hill was, in a sense, the center of attraction. During the day, people came from far and near to view "the extraordinary spectacle produced by the elements." (Those are the words of Mr. Charlie Jones, who had a full-page story of the storm in *The Express*, done in his best vein, despite many typographical errors due to excusable haste on his part as proof-reader and the even more excusable lack of it on the part of a usually dependable compositor who, not satisfied with being half-drowned by water the night before spent most of the morning trying to finish the job with something else.) Word got about that Rufus Playden was sick-abled as the result of exposure. Dick Carr and the Hinkle girl gave very elaborate accounts of the night's "doings." They hadn't gone to bed at all. The former was down at Doc Carter's till long after sun-up, waiting for Barbara and Rufus and "the kid." "Miss Hinkle," (said the *Express*), "was the Grace Darling of the century. She braved wind and rain and Jovian wrath, performing such deeds of valor as will long remain in the memory of the people of this city." Under separate headlines, Mr. Jones devoted a full column to the miraculous escape of Mrs. Jaggard and her infant son, both of whom had been stunned, the life of the latter being restored (after apparent dissolution) by "one of Hurdleford's most distinguished physicians, Dr. Frank Carter, of Bridge Crest." He closed the account with a tribute to Mr. Playden, and, after alluding to what every one hoped would be nothing more than a slight cold due to exposure, he bethought himself to add the cheering news that mother and child were both doing well.

As a matter of fact, Rufus was quite ill. He had contracted a heavy cold and was in bed with a temperature;

he had had chill after chill; Dr. Higgs and Dr. Carter were afraid of pneumonia. On the other hand, the baby was apparently none the worse for the experience. His mother kept him in bed, however, seldom leaving the room notwithstanding her own shaken and demoralized condition. She would not admit it, but she was by no means recovered from the shock that had hurled her to the floor; there were times when everything about her turned a greenish yellow, times when the queer, persistent, smothering sensation that constantly was with her in varying degrees of severity caused her to reel and gasp for breath.

She paid little attention to the husband who had been put to bed in the room once occupied by Absalom Jaggard, now known as the spare-room, the baby being snugly ensconced in the twin-bed next to hers where he enjoyed the care and attention of the whole household. Dr. Higgs left some medicine for Rufus, with directions to Barbara to give it to him at certain intervals. She forgot all about it. She did not forget, however, to order Dick Carr early in the forenoon to see to it that men were put to work immediately clearing away the wreckage; and to notify the telephone people to come up and repair the line at once.

Long before noon axes and saws and hammers were busy. Mr. Carr, resting the helve of his ax against his hip long enough to spit on his hands, remarked to the chief line-repairer:

"I never see such a person as she is for bein' on the job. Don't let no grass grow under her feet, lemme tell you."

And the line-repairer observed: "I ought to be down town right now 'tending to the bank. Plumb out of commission. But here I am, sent up here in a hurry, special order. How does she do it?"

"Well," said Mr. Carr slowly, casting a wary eye up at the windows, "I guess it's because there wouldn't be any sense in the bank havin' a telephone unless she could use it, and she couldn't till after her'n was fixed, could she?"

Tom Wayne sent one of his employes to inquire how his brother-in-law was getting along, and Ike Moses hobbled up from Shelby Wayne's house to inform Miss Barbara Lee that her pa "wondered to know ef dey wuz ary thing he could do to he'p her out," proffering the shelter of his home as long as she and Rufus cared to stay there.

Ike Moses laid great stress upon the fact that Marse Shelby particularly cautioned him not to forget to say that the baby was also expected, taking it upon himself to magnanimously add that "nothin' could be moh hospital dan dat, Miss Barbara Lee, sez Ah when Ah gits so's Ah could believe ma own ears. Yas, *ma'am!* Ah suttinly didn't trust 'em at first, Miss Barbara Lee."

Two days later Dr. Higgs announced that Rufus unquestionably had pneumonia and that his heart was very bad. Strained it that night, of course, and—well, it looked pretty serious. Whereupon Barbara, shocked more by her own previous indifference than by the doctor's alarming verdict, underwent a transformation that gave the old man a new light on her, completely destroying a rather harsh estimate he had formed in the past day or two. She abandoned the baby to Miss Remster and devoted herself to Rufus. No one could have been more tender, more anxious, more untiring. The best doctors in Radley were summoned and a wire was sent to a big man in Chicago to be ready to start for Hurdleford at a moment's notice. Capable nurses were rushed over from the Radley Hospital.

"No, I don't want Eva Joslin," said she, in answer to the doctor's suggestion. No explanation was necessary but she afforded it, just the same. "She listens at keyholes, Dr. Higgs."

Six weeks passed before Rufus Playden was satisfactorily around the corner, to quote the old family doctor. Twice all hope had been abandoned but he had rallied, drawing back from death's door even as he was about to pass through. At no time, even when his temperature was

highest, did he become delirious. Somehow he fought it off, undoubtedly by sheer force of will. He was more afraid of delirium than he was of death. He was ready and in a sense willing to die; his only dread was that he might go out of his head and talk before he died.

Never, so long as he lived, would he reveal the secret he had sworn to take to the grave with him.

It was too late now for him to confess what he had done; he had sealed his lips forever when he took Bennie Jaggard's widow to be his wife. Not all the powers in heaven or hell could drag the truth out of him now. He summed it all up as he lay there in bed, fighting death by day and night: even if he were to tell the truth in the last minute of his life, with his final gasp just before he went out, he would leave behind him a wound that would make Barbara hate him till her dying day.

She had trusted him, she believed him to be the soul of truth and honor. The cruelest thing he could do would be to stick a knife into her heart and go away, leaving it there to hurt her all the rest of her days. It would be cowardly. He would be beyond her reproaches, her scorn, her vengeance if she chose to exact it; he would know but a single moment of the revulsion and horror that filled her eyes as his soul sped off to safety. He loved her so deeply that he could not bear the thought of being despised by her after he was dead.

Not once did he consider what it would mean to her brothers if he were to confess his guilt and set them straight with the world; they were safe, no harm could come to them. The time would surely come when they would know this much of the truth: that neither of them had killed Bennie Jaggard. The time would come when Barbara would take them back to her heart and rejoice. But they would never know the truth. They would all be happier in not knowing. Bennie's boy would never know. So he staved off the delirium that would have cursed and betrayed him.

As soon as he was able to travel, she took him to northern Michigan, away from the stifling heat that falls upon middle Indiana in August and September. And when they came back to the house on the hill in October, the crisp, sparkling fall was there to welcome them, but there was no joy in her heart. He was brown, but he was leaner than ever, his cheeks were hollow, the gleam in his brilliant eyes was strangely bright and burning. A little hacking cough could not be shaken off. Specialists in Chicago had calmly—it seemed to her heartlessly—advised her to get him out to Arizona at once. There were spots on his lungs. . . . He was doomed.

Before speaking to Rufus, she consulted Dr. Higgs, hoping that he, sound old country practitioner, would tell her, as he was likely to do if he felt like it, that the Chicago experts were "blamed fools" and for her to pay no attention to their ridiculous guesses. But Dr. Higgs bore them out.

"He can't live in this climate, Barbara," he reported to her. "You might as well be told right off the handle. He's got a chance out there and he hasn't a ghost of one here."

"Then you are convinced that he has—consumption?"

"There is no doubt about it. He isn't good for long."

She blanched. "I will do anything you say, Dr. Higgs. We will start to-morrow if you think best."

He smiled a little grimly. "I guess we'll have to wait till we've convinced him that it's best. Rufus isn't going to be easy to handle. He's as stubborn as a mule, you know. We'll have to get around him some way before we can do——"

"Leave that to me, Doctor."

"All right,—but don't call me the doctor. You're the doctor, my dear. It's up to you."

"He caught cold that night doing what he knew would please me. He thought only of me. It's my turn now, Dr. Higgs."

She tactfully broached the subject to Rufus. He smiled as he held up his hand after listening to her dilate for a few minutes on the benefits they would both derive from a winter in the Far West.

"I know what's the matter with me, Barbara. I've got tuberculosis. No use beating about the bush, no use trying to deceive me. I know. I went to see a doctor myself up in Chicago. You didn't know about it. One of the biggest men there. I wanted the truth and he gave it to me. I'm pretty well advanced. Quick consumption, he calls it. Now, don't be unhappy, dearest. You're as white as a sheet. Buck up! We'll stay right here in Hurdleford and trust to luck. And, by gosh, I'd a darned right sooner be dead here than alive out there in Arizona. What's more, I'm not going to die. Just put that out of your dear little head."

She resigned herself to pleading. It was of no avail. The days went by and he did not give an inch. Always he smiled and shook his head. His consideration for her and the baby took the form of voluntary self-banishment; without so much as a word of explanation, he moved into old Absalom's room and subsequently had a sleeping-porch constructed for himself at the rear of the house. Every day he went down to the office and put in his customary hours of labor, unmindful of the remonstrances of his father, Mr. Crouse and Dr. Higgs.

Tom Wayne went there to see him one day.

"See here, Rufe," he said, "you ought to cut out business for awhile. Go away and build up. Take it easy."

There was no mistaking the young man's earnestness. He was deeply and sincerely moved.

"Don't you worry about me, Tom. I'll be all right."

"Winter is coming,—a long hard winter. You know what our winters are, old boy. Scoot out to California or somewhere and avoid the rotten weather we're sure to have in these parts. A winter out there would fix you up as fit

as a fiddle and you'd be as good as new by spring. Now you do what I——"

"Rats! You talk as if I were on my last legs, Tommy."

"Rats yourself! I don't think anything of the sort," lied Tom Wayne with energy. "All I want you to do is to take care of yourself so you won't get down with a bad spell of sickness. A fellow can't have pneumonia, especially a hard case like you had, and not be pulled down a lot, I don't care how husky he is. They say it goes harder with the huskies than it does with anybody else. Pneumonia, I mean."

"That's all to the good. I'm not what you'd call a husky, Tom. Why, good Lord, what if I have got a nasty little cough? Lots of people have. Take Ed Harvey for instance. He's had a cough for twenty years and——"

"If the doctor told Ed Harvey he'd die in six months if he didn't stop drinking you'd darned soon see how easy it would be for him to stop coughing," was Tom's dry rejoinder.

That evening young Wayne gloomily informed his wife that it almost broke his heart to see poor old Rufus looking the way he did.

"And all on account of Barbara and that baby of Bennie Jaggard's."

"You would have done the same, Tom," said Stella, loyal to her lord.

"I reckon I would," he admitted, after a moment. "Just the same, Rufe is a queer combination. He was willing to take a chance on losing his life for Bennie's child but he won't accept the chance to save his own by using Bennie's money."

"What do you mean?"

"Judge Playden told me to-day that the only reason Rufe won't go west is because he can't afford it."

"I see," said she, understandingly. "He won't let Barbara pay his expenses with her first husband's money?"

"That's it, exactly. Not many men like that, Stell."

"He's foolish. He could pay it back, of course, later on."

"Well, he's dead set against it. The Judge is ready to stake him, but he won't stand for that either. So I thought—er—well, you know that fifteen hundred dollars he lent me? I figured I might scrape it up and hand it over to him. It would mean that we'd have to go a little slow for a while, you and I, Stella,—that is, we'd have to pinch somewhat for a year or so, but if it would do him any good right now, I'd—why, I'd live on bread and water to——" He paused, compressing his lips.

"Did you suggest it to him?"

"Sure I did. He just laughed at me."

She stroked his crumpled hair and smiled as she said:

"Did you tell him you'd be willing to live on bread and water, you poor goose?"

"Well, I wanted him to know how earnest I was," said he, defensively.

"And what did he say to that?"

"You never know how to take Rufe Playden. He sort of grinned and said he could die very comfortably without starving to death but he didn't see how I could starve to death without being frightfully uncomfortable about it. But I'm going to get that money back to him somehow, Stella. Sure as you're a foot high, I'm going to do it."

"If you'll just give me half of every glass of water and a nice little piece of your bread, I'll not complain," said she, lovingly.

He was silent for a long time. "I wonder if Rufe's wife would do as much for him," he mused aloud.

"You say she has offered to share her money with him."

"Yes, but would she go so far as to share a glass of water and a loaf of bread with him?"

The winter months laid hold of Rufus and sealed his doom. He knew what was coming,—well, perhaps in the

Spring. His doggedness was beyond all understanding. Barbara, in desperation, lost her temper with him one day and blurted out:

"You ought to think of me, Rufus! You've got to get well for my sake. Can't you see how it's worrying me almost to death to see you——"

"You told me six months before we were married, dear, that you didn't love me," he broke in, shaking his head. "You don't love me now. I've tried my best and so have you. I thought for a while that maybe you were forgetting but—well, I won't say it, Barbara dearest."

"Is it because I told you I did not want to have any more children that you feel as you do, Rufus?"

"No. It's because you still love Bennie Jaggard."

"You—you mean that?" she muttered.

"I am not asking you to deny it, dear."

"Suppose I should deny it?"

"I wouldn't believe you," said he, gently, without a trace of rancor.

She was speechless. Her eyes widened and then contracted with pain. After a moment she turned away and hurried up the stairs to her bedroom. There was a cheerful fire in the grate. Nevertheless it looked cold and drear and uncompanionable to her. She poked it up and sat down before it, holding out her hands. They were weak and trembly. Slowly tears came into her eyes.

"Poor old Rufus,—poor dear old Rufus," she was thinking bleakly. "Why can't I give him the love he deserves? Why can't I forget? Sometimes I think I am the meanest thing alive. It breaks my heart to see him like this, and yet what can I do more than I have done? God help me, I do not love him. But I am willing, and he knows I am willing, to go on and live my life out with him, in spite of everything."

She stared through her tears for a long time, a prey to the darkest remorse and self-detestation. Then she arose

and began pacing the floor, drying her eyes with her handkerchief.

"I know what's in his mind. I know why he is giving up, why he doesn't care to live. God in heaven! Have you another man like him in all your world? Is there another one who would make such a sacrifice for the woman he loves? I'll never forget what he said that night. 'If I could have a year with you, I would——' Oh, what nonsense! He isn't fair to himself and he isn't fair to me. I never deceived him. I never lied to him. He can't say I haven't played fair. Ah, but then he doesn't say that. If he only would say it. If he would only take me to task, upbraid me,—anything but this. What a fool I was to tell him I wouldn't have any more children! He saw through everything that night,—and so he saved little Bennie for my sake. And now I have to sit helpless and watch him die! It's—it's maddening. He infuriates me sometimes. Does he think I am enjoying this? Does he imagine that I will thank him for dying? Oh, damn him! I wish I could make him understand that of all things I want most in the world is for him to get well! What's to become of me if he dies?"

Downstairs Rufus too was sitting in front of a fireplace but his thoughts were not of her. His brow was furrowed, his thin hands were clenched. The Hinkle girl was setting the dinner table in the next room but he did not hear her. He was thinking of the invisible thing that had pushed past him into the house on the night of the storm, of the thing that had pursued him all the way down to Dr. Carter's house.

He knew now, as he had known that night, that Barbara loved this invisible thing and that it would always stand between them. It would always stand guard over her until the time came for it to slink away because she herself had cast it off. Not until she loved some other man as she had loved Bennie Jaggard would she be free of him.

It was a queer, fantastic ghost that haunted Rufus in those days: the house itself was *full* of Bennie Jaggard! Never at any time was he out of the house except when Barbara was away; when she came back, he was with her, simply because she herself brought him in. He was with her now,—upstairs with her. Everywhere she went he was with her, a part of her. No matter whither her mind wandered in its daily pursuits, her heart was still his home. Yes, the house was *full* of Bennie Jaggard. It was fantastic but it was true.

And so Rufus knew that he had not killed him at all. He was still alive in the heart of Barbara. No matter how low and sneaking and dastardly he had been in the flesh,—and after all the destruction of the flesh was nothing!—he was still her lover and was beloved by her.

But Rufus would not run away from Bennie Jaggard. His reflections as he sat there before the fire, waiting for Barbara to come downstairs with this man whose body was lying deep on the hillside, were but typical of those that had attended him night and day for months. Aye, he would stick it out. What was the use of groveling now? Barbara did not love him but she believed in him. That was something, at least.

He was not afraid to stay there and die but he was afraid to go away, even for the sake of living, for that would mean the first crack in his armor, the first sign that his will was breaking. He would be weakening,—and God knows what he might say or do if he once began to falter. It was too late now for him to weaken. If it had been his burden alone that he was carrying he could have cast it off, now that he was going to die, but how about Barbara? He deliberately had killed her husband and he deliberately had taken her for himself.

Above all things he wanted to be sure of dying with the secret locked up in his heart; and so long as he could stand with his back to the wall he felt he was safe. He had only

to look at her, young and beautiful, and proud of him,—aye, she was proud of him, he knew!—to realize what it would mean if he struck her even with a truth that was even more cowardly and selfish than Bennie's lie.

He always smiled a little grimly when he thought of what the world would say if it ever found out what he, an honest man, had done to Barbara Wayne.

At such times he was not thinking of what he had done to Bennie Jaggard; nor of what he had done to the Wayne boys. He was sorry for the boys. If things hadn't turned out the way they did, he would have gone to the gallows long ago and they would have been sorry for him. As it was, no lasting harm had been done. For that matter, if it were not for what it would mean to Barbara, he would most certainly send for them when he was on his deathbed and tell them the truth about the killing in the lane. After that, they could fall upon one another's necks and rejoice! The barrier would be down.

He had never ceased to wonder whom they suspected of the killing of Bennie Jaggard, knowing themselves to be innocent,—or had they actually accepted the flimsy, almost laughable defense that he and his father had presented in their behalf at the time of the trial: that the murder had been committed by a person or persons unknown, presumably a roving tramp! Could it be possible that while the world believed that one of them was guilty, they alone were convinced that Bennie had been shot down by some strange vagabond?

And sometimes he wondered whether each one did not suspect the other!

Barbara was coming down the stairs. He cleared his face of the bleak cloud that always settled upon it when he was alone, arose from his chair and favored her with the smile that never failed him.

"How lovely you are to-night," he said huskily, his eyes agleam with admiration. He had greeted her in this or some

similar fashion a hundred times or more, but always the eagerness behind the words was fresh and new, as if he had never uttered them before.

Her eyes were soft. She had just been in to kiss the sleeping child.

"Thanks, dear. You never fail me, do you?" she said, smiling.

"You never give me the chance," said he gallantly.

He tried hard not to lean heavily on the arm she thrust through his as they went out to the dining-room. As usual he pulled out her chair for her and saw that she was comfortably seated. Miss Remster, following them in, took her seat without committing the error she had made a few weeks before. She did not pull out the chair for him. For the first time in his life he had been guilty of glaring at a woman.

Shortly before the holidays he gave up going to the office. It was surrender.

Samuel Crouse came up to the house on the hill one blustery day in response to a telephoned request and with Dick Carr witnessed the brief will the sick man had drawn up himself. There wasn't much to it; he hadn't much to leave. But it was an unusual document, just the same. After the customary provision dealing with just debts, funeral expenses and so forth, he devoted a fairly long clause to his father, giving expression to the love and esteem in which he held him and to his own enduring debt of gratitude, closing the paragraph with the words: "but inasmuch as he, my beloved father, is amply provided for and in no need of the pittance I might devise, I humbly beseech him to accept in lieu of worldly dross all the wealth of an affection that cannot be calculated but which, even so, falls far short of what is his due."

In the next clause he bequeathed to "My beloved wife, Barbara, the memory of an adoration greater than mortal man has ever known before, and, in addition, all of the per-

sonal effects of which I may die possessed, after the provisions contained in the ensuing clauses have been carried out by her as the executrix of this my last will." "To my adopted son, Benjamin Playden, I bequeath the sum of One Hundred (\$100.00) Dollars." "To my brother-in-law, George Shelby Wayne, in recognition of a loyal friendship that has existed unbroken between us since earliest childhood and on account of our present relationship, I bequeath the sum of Three Thousand (\$3000.00) Dollars." "To my brother-in-law, Thomas Studley Wayne, for the same reasons set forth in the clause immediately preceding this, I bequeath the sum of Fifteen Hundred (\$1500.00) Dollars in cash and hereby cancel an indebtedness amounting to Fifteen Hundred (\$1500.00) Dollars, bringing the total of my bequest to him up to Three Thousand (\$3000.00) Dollars."

Later on, he showed the document to Barbara, watching her closely as she read it. Her expression did not change until she came to the clause referring to George Wayne. A line of perplexity appeared between her eyes; it deepened into bewilderment as she glanced swiftly through the ensuing paragraph.

"Why, Rufus,—I don't understand," she murmured, now staring at him.

He coughed, then quickly put his handkerchief to his lips. There was a trace of blood on it as he took it away, crumpling it in his hand so that she might not see.

"I want you to be pleased, Barbara," he said, with an effort. "If you are not satisfied with what I have done, of course I'll alter——"

"Bless your dear old heart, I am perfectly satisfied. You are leaving more, much more, to me than I deserve. But,—George and Tom? Why have you put them in your will as,—well, almost as the sole beneficiaries, Rufus, my dear?"

"Mr. Crouse asked the same question. I gave him the same answer I shall give to you. I have no other way of

rewarding them, Barbara dear, for all they have been to me through an all too short life of friendship and faith. They are more than brothers to me. They are friends. I fully appreciate the fact that you no longer call them brothers. Nevertheless, I am married to their sister. I love them all the more because they have lost something priceless which I have gained—that little sister of theirs. Can you not understand it now, dear?"

Her eyes filled with tears. "Yes,—I can understand," she murmured, almost inaudibly. She passed her fingers gently through his sparse hair. "It is a beautiful will, Rufus,—a beautiful will."

He smiled. "I am glad you like it. I was afraid you might contest it," he went on, quite gayly.

Once, but only once,—it was a fortnight after the drawing up of the will,—did he think of taking his own life, thus hastening the death that he knew was but a short way off. He even took the loaded revolver out of his bureau drawer and fondled it. It had done a good job once before, why not again? It would be an easy way out. Then a great wave of revulsion swept over him. He thrust the weapon back into the drawer, turned his back on temptation forever, and shuffled slowly out of the room.

Barbara had had horrors enough without thrusting another upon her. It had been in his mind to steal quietly out into the night while she was at work over her accounts upstairs. Nine o'clock. She would be down presently to read to him. She wouldn't find him there. He wouldn't even have to put on his hat or overcoat, though it was a fiercely cold and windy night. What would be the sense of guarding against the cold? In five minutes he would stop shivering and—why waste time and energy looking out for his health? Yes, Barbara would miss him when she came downstairs. She would wonder where he had gone, she would start searching for him in the back

part of the house, and—then, perhaps, she would hear the pistol shot out there in the lane. . . .

He was sitting before the fire when she came down the steps to join him, a smile on his lips. She had been looking wan and haggard and distressed of late. It wouldn't be fair for him to give her something else to think about with horror all her life,—no, not he! Of all men, not he!

Suddenly he surprised himself by chuckling aloud. There was something so grim and yet so ludicrously tragic in the thought that if he had carried out his impulse to shoot himself he would have committed the fantastic crime of slaying both of Barbara's husbands!

Galloping consumption they calling it. Well, he would stay in the saddle until the horse he was riding stopped of its own accord.

Barbara went to see her father every day. He was the only one to whom she could talk freely about Rufus and the incomprehensible stubbornness that had put him beyond all hope of recovery. She was bitter but only because there was nothing she could do now to save him; he might have been saved if—— And now she had to stand helplessly by and watch him walk straight to his death without being able to take his hand in hers and lead him away from the pit. It was maddening.

Shelby Wayne, himself strangely broken and morose and given to long brooding silences that were unusual in him, did his best to cheer and comfort her. She always went home from these brief little visits, however, in a curious state of irritation. Her father seemed to pity poor old Rufus more than he pitied her—and she needed his pity so much! She needed it all the more because of a subtle but definite conviction that no one felt sorry for her in her present misfortune; at any rate, no one took the trouble to put an arm about her shoulder and utter words of sympathy. Women

usually did that sort of thing,—whether they really meant it or not.

Confound them! Couldn't they see how unhappy and miserable she was, and how broken up she was over Rufus?

Judge Playden sometimes stroked her shoulder and said it would probably be a great relief to her when the terrible strain was over,—and he looked very sad when he said it, poor old man,—but somehow she had the feeling that he was sorrier for himself than he was for her. That was natural, of course; she did not resent his feeling that way about it. But didn't *anybody* feel sorry for her?

Nevertheless she always was ashamed of these swiftly passing little periods of exasperation with her father. How old and tired he was looking! He hadn't had much to make him happy in the last few years. She was a beast to expect him to feel sorry for her after the way she had treated him. So she went daily to the old house and in every way tried to let him see how truly she loved him, how earnestly she was striving to set herself straight in his thoughts again.

The end came in February. Rufus lay on his deathbed. His father was there, and Dr. Higgs. Barbara knelt beside him, holding one of his cold hands. His last words were:

"I never dreamed it could be as easy as this! Why, it isn't terrible at all. I thought it would be, Barbara. It is—it is so—very—easy. Don't cry, dearest."

And so he died, taking his secret with him. He and Bennie Jaggard were both dead. There was no one left to tell the tale. He was not afraid to meet Bennie on the other shore. He had saved Barbara,—and he had made good his own escape.

There were no stalwart Waynes in the house for Barbara to turn to or to lean upon in her tribulation.

CHAPTER FOUR

BARBARA AND HER BROTHERS

BARBARA sat between her father and Judge Playden in the front pew of the little Presbyterian Church, a rigid black figure upon which all eyes were fixed more or less furtively. They were watching for the expected, the customary abandonment to grief that inevitably comes some time during the service no matter how staunchly the bereaved widow—(the sobs and moans of a widow are supposed to have a poignancy even more satisfying to the feminine observer than those of a mother, for when all is said and done, the widow is only burying another woman's son and not her own)—no matter how staunchly she may be defending her emotions, no matter how firm she may be in her resolution not to make a spectacle of herself.

A large and sepulchral congregation was waiting to see the first spasmodic heave of Barbara's shoulders and to hear the stifled outburst of—— But nothing of the sort happened. She sat still and mute throughout the service, and, when it was all over, followed the pallbearers and their burden out into the gray February morning, leaning on her father's arm and, walking with a much brisker stride than Hurdleford considered strictly commendable, entered the waiting motor-car and, so far as anybody could see, set out for the cemetery without the sign of a tear in her eye. At any rate, several ladies who managed to get quite close to her were emphatic in their declarations that they did not hear her sniffle once,—and they certainly would have heard her if she had, because they were listening "very particularly." Hurdleford was disappointed and shocked.

She had heard the Rev. Mr. Davidson extol Rufus Playden as no "deceased" of his years had ever been eulogized in

Hurdleford before; she had, without emotion, listened to his gentle, tearful supplication in behalf of the bereaved, heart-broken companion who was left behind, and in whose behalf he implored God in His kindness and His wisdom to provide fortitude and—— Her lips had curled a little at this. Were preachers always in earnest?

That same lip trembled and her tired eyes filled with tears, however, when Stella Wayne stood up in the choir loft and sang "Lead, Kindly Light," and "Nearer, my God, to Thee," Rufus's favorite hymns. There was no other music. She had acquiesced when Judge Playden hesitatingly and wistfully suggested that Stella be asked to sing during the church service. Rufus had always liked Stella's singing; many a time he had spoken of the effect her sweet, rather haunting contralto voice had had upon him. He would be pleased if he could know that she was singing the songs he loved so well, said Judge Playden. . . .

Barbara had choked up when Tom's wife, standing up there alone to sing bravely for her friend in the presence of her enemy, faltered under the strain and came near to breaking down before she got through with the last song. Through a mist of tears, she watched Stella's tense, uplifted face as she sang her heart out for Tom's friend; somehow she had the uncanny feeling that the singer's words were not falling upon deaf ears and that Rufus, hearing them, was pleased.

As she passed down the aisle on her way out, she caught sight of her brothers seated at the inner end of a pew near the door. "Immediate relatives," she could not help thinking. They were not looking at her. On the other side of the aisle, a couple of pews behind them, sat Dr. Max Schwartz and his wife Kate. The latter's rapt, sorrowful gaze was fixed on George Wayne, as it had been ever since she entered the church.

Barbara was surprised to see her older brother there. He had come all the way from Detroit to attend the funeral.

Her father looked down in some apprehension as the fingers on his arm tightened.

"Steady, my dear," he whispered, encouragingly.

She saw the tall figures of her brothers at the cemetery. They were standing far back on the outer rim of the group, their heads bared. Stella was between them, clinging to Tom. George stood alone, a few feet away. Kate Schwartz was near him, her head bent. Barbara's incontinent thoughts strayed for a moment.

"Poor fool," she thought, staring at Kate with smoldering eyes. "She could just as well have had George instead of that horrid little Maxie Schwartz."

On the way home her father asked if she had noticed the immense bunch of red roses that lay on the foot of the casket in the church.

"No," she replied.

"Well, George brought them all the way down from Detroit with him. He—er—he hesitated about sending them up to the house. Those white roses were Tom's. Rufus was very fond of red roses, you know."

"Was he?" said she, listlessly. Then suddenly, with interest: "Bennie always liked yellow roses." The words were hardly out of her mouth when she flushed and bit her lip.

He glanced at her out of the corner of his eye. She had lifted the thick, stifling veil soon after leaving the cemetery.

"And they always have been my favorites too, father," she went on quickly. "Don't you remember how I used to love the yellow roses in our back yard?"

She had had a blanket of yellow roses made to cover Rufus's coffin, but in justice to her it must be said that until this moment she had not recalled Bennie's fondness for them. Nevertheless, she had a guilty feeling and wanted her father to understand. All he said was that he had forgotten.

As the car neared the top of the hill, he turned to her and said:

"I am going to stand by you, Barbara. Tell Dick Carr to turn in at the lane."

She started. "You mean?"

"Yes, that's what I mean. I am going to your house with you. I can't bear the thought of—of letting you go back there all alone to—well, that's all there is to it." He uttered the last remark gruffly to cover the tenderness that had crept into his voice.

"Oh, Daddy," she faltered, laying her hand on his and squeezing it.

He did not dare look at her face. He knew her eyes were upon him, wide with wonder and the dawning of a joy that he felt he was not man enough to face, so he kept his own fixed rigidly on the road ahead. His jaws were set. She noticed the extreme pallor of his gaunt cheek, and after a moment took up the speaking tube and instructed Dick Carr to turn in at the lane.

That was all. Be it said to her credit, she withheld the words that rushed to her lips. Not then nor afterward did she refer to his surprising act; she did not thank him, for that merely would have served to embarrass him. And he, grateful for her tact, said to himself:

"By gad, there is fine stuff in her,—mighty fine stuff. Not one girl in a million could have kept her mouth shut."

For the first time,—and as it turned out,—the last time, Shelby Wayne set foot inside the house of a Jaggard. He offered his arm to her and solemnly escorted her into the living-room, passing the astonished Mrs. Robbins who had hurried on ahead to be there when her mistress arrived. The Hinkle girl, cautiously watching through red eyes from a dining-room window had unwittingly gasped: "Good God," and, being a devout church-goer, made haste to add as penance, "—ness gracious!" He did not gaze about him as he passed through the door into the room; he revealed

no curiosity, no evidence of uneasiness or of the repugnance he must have felt. He had made his decision, he had broken his vow; no use regretting it now. It was his place to be with her—so here he was, "standing by" her, as he had said. Down in his heart was the feeling that he should have come to her before, that his place was with her during those days of trial and despair. She, a Wayne, his daughter, facing things without one of her own blood,—not a single one,—to offer her a hand when she most needed help and comfort and sympathy. Aye, acknowledged Shelby Wayne, deep down in his soul, he had behaved very badly toward his baby girl, the only girl among all the Waynes.

He was pleased and secretly gloated a little when Judge Playden drove up half an hour later to inquire if there was anything he could do for his son's widow. The Judge concealed his surprise and gratification. To all appearance, he accepted Shelby Wayne's presence as a natural thing—indeed as if it had long been the custom of Barbara's father to make himself at home there.

The two old men sat together in front of the fire while she was upstairs with the baby. She had requested them to smoke, calmly offering a half-empty box of Rufus's cigars. They took one apiece, both feeling that it would ease the strain a little if they met her half-way in what they were constrained to look upon as an amazing and courageous example of self restraint on her part. Presently Shelby Wayne laid his hand on the other's knee and said:

"Aleck, I want you to know how sorry I am for you. Rufus was your only child. Your heart was wrapped up in him. I want you to know how—how terribly sorry I am, old fellow."

"Thank you, Shelby," said the other huskily, and puffed manfully at his cigar. "I know you mean it. Thank you." A long silence during which they studied the fire mistily. "The best thing I can possibly say for my boy is that he loved your girl, Shelby." Shelby nodded his head but

said nothing. The Judge went on: "She is the bravest girl I know. She has taken this—this thing like a soldier. Most women would have gone to smash."

"Barbara's a thoroughbred, Aleck," said Mr. Wayne simply.

The undertaker's assistants had removed every vestige of funeral paraphernalia; there was nothing left, inside or out, to remind one that death had reigned briefly and austere over the house. The crêpe was gone from the door, the flowers had been spirited away—even the pungent odor of these had been "ventilated" out of existence through open doors and windows—casket stands and a few collapsible chairs had been yanked ruthlessly out of the house and dumped with sacrilegious clatter into a van and hurried off to their casual resting place. The window shutters were open, the shades were up.

The room would have looked pleasantly cheerful to any one save the two fathers who sat before the fire which was doing its merry best to be gay and lively. All this had been accomplished because Barbara had told Mrs. Robbins to see to it that the undertaker cleared the place up without fail before she returned from the cemetery. It even seemed that the sun had had his orders from her, for out from a leaden sky he forced his way to shine brightly down upon her as she drove up to the house; sunshine streamed in through the windows, mellowing the gloom that had prevailed for days. A harsh wind that had been howling a dirge through the cedars was now humming a mild requiem.

"I did my best to bring Rufus up in the right way, Shelby," mused Judge Playden. "His mother died when he was a young boy, so he never had anybody to really turn to for a good many years."

Wayne looked at him in surprise. "What do you mean, Aleck? He had you to turn to, didn't he?"

The Judge shook his head and smiled faintly. "I guess you know what I mean. We're all alike, Shelby, we men.

You see, when it comes down to it, we're all sons. We never take our troubles, our sorrows, our misdeeds to our fathers, in spite of the fact that they too were sons and had mothers. We always took them to our mothers. Maybe it would have been truer if I had said that since he was a little boy Rufus never had any mother to abuse."

"My dear Aleck!"

"He was denied that privilege," went on the Judge, pursing his lips. "I've often thought of it—and felt sorry for him. I guess, if you'll stop and think a minute, Shelby, you'll agree that you were the same as any other son. You put upon your mother just as all the rest of us did—and do. It seems to be the nature of sons."

"I wonder if you are not right," said Shelby slowly.

"Of course I'm right. A son is too proud to carry his misdeeds and his faults to his father, but he never hesitates to take them to his mother. That's what mothers are for, I reckon. We boys never get over feeling that they owe us something,—more shame to us,—and that they've got to take care of us, shield us, lie for us and suffer for us all their lives. Once in a while you hear of sons mean enough to selfishly bleed their mothers to death, just as they once drew milk from their breasts, in order to live. Thank God, there aren't many like that. Sons are always asking, always expecting, always getting something from their mothers. And the mothers love to give, Shelby,—they love it. That's what my boy missed. He missed having a mother to make sacrifices for him when he needed them."

"Now that you mention it, Aleck, my wife was always watching over George and Tom as if—— Yes, I see what you mean. We're all alike, we sons. There isn't one of us, I reckon, who wouldn't die for his mother, but how many of us are there that stop to think how many times our mothers have been killed by us?"

"I did my best to make Rufus feel that he could bring his troubles to me whenever they came up, just as he would

have taken them to his mother. But it wasn't in him to do it. It isn't in any of us, Shelby."

"You've never had a daughter, Aleck. They always go to their fathers with their troubles. Barbara always said that I would understand better than her mother."

"Well, that's natural too," said the other. "It's a hard thing to say, but it seems to be true that daughters are braver than sons. They tackle the strong instead of the weak."

"Want a light, Aleck? Your cigar's out."

"Thank you," said the Judge, accepting the cigar that Shelby held out to him. Putting it to his own, he sucked vigorously two or three times. "So is yours, Shelby."

Miss Remster entered the room.

"Mrs. Jaggard would like it very much if you would both stay and have dinner with her," she said.

The old men got to their feet, Shelby Wayne very red in the face.

"Mrs. Jaggard?" he demanded, sharply, his eyes on Judge Playden.

The poor nurse shot a look of dismay from one to the other of the fathers.

"Oh, goodness," she almost gasped. "I—what a horrible mistake. I meant Mrs. Playden. Really I——"

"Quite a natural slip of the tongue, Miss Remster," said the Judge, gravely, courteously. "Please say to my daughter-in-law that I will remain if it will afford her the slightest comfort."

"Tell her I'll stay too," said Shelby Wayne, gruffly. For the life of him he could not help glaring angrily at his old friend. Hadn't he just got through telling him that daughters always went to their fathers when they wanted to talk about their troubles?

"And I was to tell your driver not to wait, Judge Playden," went on the nurse, hurriedly, "in case you would stay. Mrs. Playden will send you down in her car."

Barbara came down half an hour later. She had taken

off the heavy, cumbersome, black dress and veil and had gotten into one of the old frocks she had worn when in mourning for Bennie Jaggard. She moved with her accustomed grace and freedom, a tall, slender, erect figure. Except for the fact that her eyes were tired and heavy, with faint shadows under them, she produced an almost unbelievable appearance of composure and self-restraint. Just before they went out to the dining-room, she faced the two men and with a curious, dull note in her voice, remarked:

"I suppose you are both displeased with me. You must be wondering how I can be so—well, so calm, if you want to call it that. Just remember that I had about all any girl could stand the day Rufus told me about Bennie. Nothing can ever make me as I was before that. I guess I used up all the anguish that God gave me to start off with. I am saying this, Judge Playden, so that you will not look upon me as heartless and unfeeling about poor Rufus. Please do not blame me, please do not think that I did not care for him or that I am not terribly hurt by his death. I just simply ask you to believe me when I say that the shock I had that day up in Connecticut took something out of me that never can be restored. I hope you understand, dear Judge Playden?"

"I do, Barbara," said he, laying his hand on her shoulder. "You had your full share then. Please do not think of it again. Still, I am glad you have had the courage and the fairness to speak out instead of running the risk of having me draw false conclusions. You have eased my mind, my dear."

She shook her head slowly. "On the contrary, Judge Playden, I have to some extent eased my own."

Long afterward Judge Playden, in reflecting upon that rather cryptic remark, recalled the seemingly superfluous words "to some extent," and wondered.

Her calmness did not desert her during the long meal. She did everything in her power to make it as easy as pos-

sible for Rufus's father, who, she realized, was the true mourner. She was thoughtful, gentle, considerate; it may sound hard to declare that she had her wits about her, but it is true. She respected and in her way adored Judge Playden. Her feeling for him, her sympathy, was genuine. Her heart was very sore on his account. But now that her own father was there, she was eager to be rid of Rufus's. It was a relief to her when the old lawyer announced a few minutes after the meal was over that if she would excuse him he would be getting along home. She sent him down in the car, kissing him as he stood with his hand on the door-knob.

"Is George staying with you, father?" she inquired, re-joining Mr. Wayne at the fireplace.

"Yes. Came last night."

"How long will he be here?"

"Several days, I think. He says he's got something he wants to talk over with Tom. Something about their deal, I suppose. I told him about Rufus's will."

"What did he say?"

"He said he couldn't take it. It wouldn't be fair to either you or Judge Playden."

"I told Rufus that both of them would take that very stand. I couldn't say to him at the time,—it would have hurt him,—I couldn't tell him that the Waynes are not that kind of people."

"What's to become of the money if they refuse to take it, my dear? He made no other provision, you know. It was satisfactory to you and the Judge."

"Do you think they will accept it?" she asked, her eyes narrowing.

"No. I am sure they won't."

"Well, then, here is the plan I have thought out, father. There seems to be no other way but for them to take the money, so if you will suggest to them that they,—mind you, the idea is supposed to be your own, not mine,—suggest that

they take it and build a stone fountain where that old wooden one is at Center and Oxford Streets, with a shaft of some sort and a tablet to the memory of Rufus Playden. It could be called the Rufus Playden Memorial Fountain. It seems to me that that is the best way out of it for George and Tom. They wouldn't feel so much like thieves if they put the money to some such use."

"Seems to me that it wouldn't be just what Rufus would like, Barbara, having a memorial to himself built with his own money."

"I had thought of that. Everybody will know that he left this money to the boys. There is no harm in everybody knowing that they spent every penny of it in this way."

"I will talk it over with them," said he.

He left soon afterward, starting off on foot after professing a desire to walk rather than to ride. She watched him stalk off down the lane and was struck by the way his shoulders were hunched and his head was bent. Once she thought he swayed a little—— She walked swiftly to the kitchen and directed the Hinkle girl to send Dick Carr after him with the automobile. From an upstairs window she saw the car stop just below the mouth of the lane; after what evidently was a short argument, her father laboriously got in and was driven homeward.

Her eyes were clouded. She was troubled. What could be wrong with her father?

The baby, fresh from his nap and all unconscious of the gloom that had fallen upon the house, was brought down to her as she sat alone, staring thoughtfully, frowningly into the fire. She took him in her lap and cuddled him for a while, putting him down among his playthings on the floor when his wriggling insistence proved that for the moment at least her man-child loved his toys more than he loved his mother. She found herself wondering if he would always be like this: eager to put his mother aside for playthings. No, not always, she reflected, for there were times when he

bumped his head or hurt his finger or was hungry—she could count on him then to fly to her for comfort. She hoped it would always be like that with him. Her mother had said, more than once, paraphrasing an old adage: "Boys always come home to roost!"

She remembered Bennie Jaggard sighing, when they were in the first happy year of marriage: "I don't see how I could be happier than I am, but, by George, I'd give a lot if mother were only alive to see how happy we are."

So that was the way with men, was it? She thrilled a little at the thought. Men never got over thinking of their mothers and wanting to see them. How different it was with women! They never gave much thought to their own mothers after they had children of their own. She sat for a long time looking down upon the busy, laughing child. He was pounding the floor gleefully with a mangled but still cherished rag doll. She forgot herself for the moment and laughed with him when he shrieked for approval over the way in which he abused the thing that was dearer to him than all of his other possessions put together. Her smile lingered. That was the way with men. They liked to smash things. George and Tom liked to destroy things when they were boys; they liked to kill birds and rabbits and—— Suddenly she felt her blood turn cold. Yes, that was the way with men. They killed things.

Then, with a little gasp of horror and compunction, she realized that she was permitting Bennie to romp on the very spot where but a few hours before a casket had stood, draped in black and covered with flowers. Springing to her feet, she called upstairs to Miss Remster.

"Take him upstairs, please," she ordered, almost harshly. "I want to be alone. Never mind if he does cry. Take his toys with you."

For a while she paced the floor, dropping wearily into a chair at last. There she sat for a long time, brooding. She

was taking stock of herself, she was looking ahead to her future.

Twenty-six years old! Only twenty-six! Young and strong and full of life. Twice widowed at twenty-six. What was ahead of her? Could it be possible that life, such as it is reckoned, was over for her? Was she to go on to the end as she was now,—a widow with nothing in life except the baby boy, her own affairs, and—loneliness?

Ah, that reminded her. She would have to get back to work, she would have to take up the tangled ends. Affairs had been neglected for weeks. She didn't know how things stood. She hadn't cared a great deal. But now she could go back to them: there was much to do. A lot of time had been lost.

Her brow furrowed. Things may have gotten into bad shape, a mess. She would have to start in at once to put them in order again. That matter of the dairy, for instance, —the project she and John Howard had talked over late in the fall, a big, up-to-date dairy, with a market in Indianapolis. . . . And that reminded her of another very important detail. There was no one to take the place of Rufus in looking after her investments, her mortgages and countless other matters of that sort. Would Judge Playden or Sam Crouse be able to give them the attention that Rufus had devoted to them? Or would she have to engage another lawyer, a younger man, to take charge of—— Now, there was an able chap over in Radley, a live, hustling young man of whom people, including Rufus himself, expected great things. She had met him two or three times. He and Rufus had handled cases together. Rufus always had spoken of him as a "comer." However, time enough for that! She would see. In any case, she would not think of doing anything about it until she had consulted Judge Playden.

She strolled through the silent house, coming finally to the room in which Rufus had died. Her critical eye swept

over everything. The room was in order,—perfect order. Still, there was no reason why the shades should be down. She raised them,—and, on second thought, opened the windows.

How different everything was! Only a day or so ago there had been nurses and doctors everywhere, and those cousins of Rufus's; and the shirt-sleeved men who had come up from the undertaker's to—— She shuddered violently. Poor old Rufus!

George Wayne had returned to Hurdleford with a double purpose in mind. Rufus's funeral was secondary. To be sure, he had used it primarily as an excuse for coming; his real object, however, was the result of long deliberation and a final determination to have a straight, out-and-out talk with his brother Tom about the killing of Bennie Jaggard. He was resolved now to force him to speak. Perhaps Tom had told Stella,—yes, certainly he had told her,—it was not like him to ask her to marry him without laying the truth before her. But had Tom been fair to him? He might have said in the beginning: "You are a brick, George, for sharing this thing with me. No one ever had such a brother."

Well, he'd have to talk now. He would have to come out with the whole story of the killing of Bennie Jaggard. Not for the world to hear; for him alone. Not even for their own father to hear, nor Barbara herself. He would not demand that of Tom.

He expected to have dinner with his father. Tom and Stella drove out with him in their new car and left him at the old home, declining his unauthorized invitation to remain. Old Lizzie Smith gave him the surprising news that some one had telephoned from Barbara's to say that Mr. Wayne was having dinner with her and could not say how long it would be before he came home.

He had his dinner alone and at two o'clock left the house, walking to town. He went straight to Tom's place of busi-

ness. There he was told that his brother had gone to Radley and would not return until late afternoon. It struck him as odd that Tom had not mentioned the trip when they were together that morning. Moreover, he was angry. They hadn't seen one another in months and here was Tom kiting off to Radley the instant he—— Well, it was pretty rotten, —pretty *damned* rotten,—that's all he had to say about it. And he had told Tom he was coming in to see him shortly after dinner.

He spent the better part of the afternoon strolling from store to store, office to office, calling on old friends. About sundown he called up Tom's office from the Hoffman House, only to find that his brother had gone home for the day. He immediately called the house and again received the information, this time from Stella, that Tom was out. By this time he was in a sullen rage. It was obvious that his brother was avoiding him.

"Well, where can I find him, Stella?" he demanded, more gruffly than he realized.

"He said something about going out to your father's, George. And"—here she hesitated so long that he thought they had been cut off—"he said the chances were he would stay there for supper with you and Mr. Wayne."

"He did?"

"Yes. He wants to have a nice, jolly old talk with you, George,—with nobody around. Not even me," she said.

He swallowed hard before speaking. "Why,—that'll be great, Stella. Do you know whether he's out at father's now?"

"I don't think so. He said he would call me up as soon as he got there to let me know whether he'd be home for supper or not. But not before half-past six, he said."

"More than an hour yet. I wish I knew where I could find him now."

"I don't know where he is, George."

"Well,—thanks. I'll run in to see you to-morrow, Stell.

How's my namesake? Give him a nice smack for me, will you? So long!"

He started off briskly in the direction of the bridge. It was quite dark now; the street lights were coming on. On the corner below the hotel he came face to face with Kate Schwartz, walking slowly toward him. He stopped and shook hands with her.

"I am awfully glad to see you, George," she said, looking straight into his eyes.

"How are you, Kate? Well, I hope?"

"How long are you going to be here, George?" she asked abruptly.

"Only a day or two."

"Where are you going now?"

"Home. Out to father's. I'm late, so I guess I'll have to be skipping along. How is Maxie?"

"Mind if I walk a little way with you, George?"

He looked hard at her for a moment before replying.

"You haven't answered my question.

"Maxie? Oh, he's all right. I've nothing to do for half an hour. It's early. Nobody's going to think anything about it if they see you and me strolling along——"

"I'll walk with you as far as Maxie's office, Kate,—in the next block," said he, rather grimly.

She stiffened. "You're not very polite, George Wayne."

"I'm going to stop in at Maxie's for a minute or so to say hello to him. Nothing impolite in that, is there?"

"Oh, I'm not a fool," she exclaimed, harshly.

"Neither am I," said he. Suddenly he grasped her wrist in his big gloved hand. "See here," he began, lowering his voice to a fierce half-whisper, "you go your way and I'll go mine. One of the reasons why I left Hurdleford was on your account. I'm only human, Kate. I was afraid I couldn't stand temptation. Besides it was fair to you for me to get out. I guess you know what I mean."

She was silent for a moment. "All right," she said,

quietly. "I hope you will be happy, George. I'll never get over caring for you,—but there's no use talking about that any more. Maybe I can be happy too,—in a different sort of way. I'm going to have a baby soon. That will change things."

He started. "That—that's fine, Kate," he cried, warmly, releasing her wrist.

She uttered a short, hard little laugh. "You wouldn't say that and you wouldn't look as you do if you still cared for me. There is another girl. Tell me, straight out,—isn't that true?"

"Would it make you any happier if I were to say yes to that?"

"It would make me happier, George, if I knew you had found some one who was good enough for you and who could love you better than I did."

"There is a girl up in Detroit, Kate," said he, after a moment.

"I am glad," said she, lowering her chin until it was lost in the fur piece about her neck. "I knew it,—I felt it somehow. Well, I hope you will be happy, George. I mean it,—from the bottom of my heart, I mean it. I don't deserve your love. It was just the same as being faithless to you when I went to live with Maxie. So I guess I'm a bad woman in a——"

"Oh, for the Lord's sake, don't say——"

"And I don't suppose it would have made a good woman of me if you had—— But, never mind. As you said a moment ago, you go your way and I'll go mine. Good-by, George,—and God bless you."

She walked swiftly away, leaving him standing there, gazing after her. As he started off down the street he groaned:

"Lord, if only there *was* another girl—anywhere!"

He was nearing the top of the ridge when Tom overtook him in the car.

"Hello, there!" shouted the younger Wayne, jamming down the brake and coming to a stop forty or fifty feet beyond the trudging pedestrian. "Get in here. Stella said you were at the Hoffman. I drove around there but——"

"I've been looking for you all afternoon," broke in George, coming up and halting alongside the car. He made no move to get in beside his brother.

"I had to be in Radley on business. Get in. I'm going to father's."

Without a word, George stepped in beside his brother and sat down. The car took the summit of the hill with a rush. As it started down the long slope, Tom put his foot on the brake.

"I'll tell you the truth, George," he said, "I skipped out of town to-day simply because I couldn't stand it any longer."

"I'm glad to hear you say that, Tommy,—awfully glad," cried the other, his throat swelling. "It means a whole lot. It means we can get back to the old——"

"Hello!" cried the younger man, looking over his shoulder. "There's Barbara's car, just turning out of the lane. By thunder, do you suppose she's going to father's?"

He pulled over to let the big car rush by.

"I wonder what's up," said George. "She must be going there. He had dinner with her to-day. She wouldn't be going to Radley after what she's been through——"

"They're stopping," exclaimed Tom. "Waiting for us."

A moment later they drew up beside Barbara's car, which had slowed down to the figurative snail's pace. Tom was creeping past when Barbara leaned out and spoke. She was alone, driving the car herself.

"Tom!" she called out. "Is that you? And George?"

Both men answered. It was George who demanded:

"What's happened, Barbara?"

It was the first time in four years that she had spoken

to them or they to her, and yet not one of them took account of it. The boys were thinking of their father.

"Lizzie just telephoned that something is the matter with father. She's worried. She said she was wondering if she'd better call Dr. Higgs. Father told her he wanted me to come down as soon as I could. Did she get you on the phone, Tom?"

"I left home half an hour ago." He threw in the clutch. As the car leaped forward he shouted to her: "Hustle along, Sis!"

The two machines arrived at the front gate almost at the same instant. Neither of the brothers had spoken during the furious rush down the hill. As Tom started to slide out from behind the wheel, George gripped his arm.

"Wait!" he whispered. "Father sent for her. How do we know he wants us, Tom? It may be his idea to see her privately about——"

"I don't give a whoop," interrupted Tom, jerking away. "If he's sick, I'm going in, Barbara or no Barbara. You know damned well there is no reason why I should fight shy of her." He took two or three steps toward the gate and then abruptly whirled and came back. "I'm sorry I said that, George, old boy," he cried, impulsively.

His brother stood stock-still, staring hard at the lean, eager face thrown into clear relief by the lights shining from Barbara's car.

"Let her go in first," he said shortly. "He sent for her. There are two of us. He's got only the one girl. We can talk out here."

They stood by the side of the car, watching their sister as she hurried past them without so much as a glance over her shoulder. Many minutes passed. Tom was the first to speak.

"This is no time for us to quarrel, George, but let's get it out of our systems now,—before we go in there. It's just between ourselves, you understand."

"Yes,—let's get it over with," said George, laying his hand on Tom's shoulder. "You'll feel better, kid. It will do you good. Out with it. I know, and you know I know,—but that's not the point. Come on, Tom,—out with it, kid."

Tom fell back, his eyes blazing. "Say!" he almost shouted. "What the devil's the matter with you? *Me* out with it? You're a nice one to——"

"Not so loud, you fool," broke in the other, hoarsely. "Do you want her to hear you? She may be on the porch. Steady down, Tommy,—you needn't be afraid to tell your old brother George. I've stuck by you all this time, haven't I?"

Tom muttered an oath. His face was close to his brother's as he grated: "Say, are you trying to put it off onto me? Good God, George,—you're not going to come out now and say I did it?"

"Just hold your horses, kid. I'm not saying you did it, am I? I'm asking *you* to say it, that's all. You'll feel better. I've——"

Tom's hand gripped his brother's arm. "I don't get you. You know I didn't do it! What's your game?" His voice was hoarse with surprise and a sort of horror.

For thirty seconds they stood there, rigid as statues, glaring at each other. Again it was Tom who spoke:

"And you know who did it, George Wayne! This is what I get for standing by you."

"For the love of God!" burst from George's lips, "you're not accusing me of shooting him?"

"Well, *didn't* you?" snarled Tom.

"No,—I didn't. Wait! Take your time! Let go of my arm! Good Lord, have I been going along all this time thinking—— Say it, Tom! Say it, I say! Didn't you kill Bennie Jaggard?"

Suddenly young Tom began to whimper,—like a boy. He was frightened, terribly frightened.

"No, I didn't. I swear to God I didn't, George. You—you don't think I did, do you? You——"

"And you thought I did it? Is that what you've been thinking all this time?"

"Why,—why, I know you shot him, George. That's why I've kept my mouth shut. I'd have died sooner than talk to you about it unless you——"

"Brace up, kid! I—I believe you. You didn't do it. But, for God's sake,—who did? What have we——"

"Let me look in your eyes," said Tom huskily. He gazed long into his brother's face. "George," he began at last, "we made a terrible mistake in not having this talk three years ago. I thought you did it and you believed it was I who—— Sh! Good Heavens! There's Barbara!"

Barbara was standing at the gate.

"Is—is that you, Barbara?" asked George, after a moment.

"Yes," came the answer distinctly. "Father sent me out to—to bring you boys in right away."

The brothers did not stir.

"Did you hear what we were saying?" It was George who spoke. Tom was speechless, shaking like a leaf.

CHAPTER FIVE
THE WAYNES

THE cold wind whistled shrilly through the leafless oaks. She did not move. Her hands gripped the gate pickets.

"Come here," she said, the command ending in a high, strained note, almost a wail.

They shuffled slowly, hesitatingly toward her. Their brains were in a whirl; they seemed to be in a curious state of torpor. Then they were standing before her, like criminals at the bar, the closed gate between them. George put his hand on one of the posts to steady himself.

"This is between Tom and me, Barbara," he muttered. "Go back to the house. Leave us alone for a while. This is our affair, not yours, Sis. We've got to——"

She interrupted him. "Not my affair? Oh, boys! Boys! I heard most of it. I heard you both deny——"

"You go in there to father. Do you hear me?" ordered Tom, something like a sob in his voice. His hand shook. "You've got nothing to do with this, Barbara. One of us may be lying. We'll come in pretty soon and—tell you. Not a word to father,—not a breath of this. Understand?"

She swayed. George reached forward and grasped her arm.

"Oh, for heaven's sake, Barbara! Open the gate, Tom. I'll take her to the house. You wait here for me."

"I don't want to be taken to the house," she burst out, jerking away. "It *is* my affair,—more than yours. Do you hear me? More than yours. Yes, I heard you. If you are both lying, I want to know it. If you are telling the truth, I've got to know it—now. You needn't be afraid to speak straight out to me. Here we are, the three of us. It's between all of us. Nobody else in the world need ever

know. I'll keep my mouth closed,—forever. You needn't be afraid of me—— Oh, for God's sake, let's have the truth, boys! Did you kill him, George?"

"Before God, I did not, Barbara." He held up his right hand. His eyes were on Tom.

"Tom?"

"So help me God, I didn't do it," said the younger Wayne, stretching out his hand to her. "I—I wanted to. Lord, how I wanted to! I wished afterwards I had. On George's account. I thought he was strong enough to resist the—the temptation. Then the next morning I found out he had done it, and I couldn't forgive myself for——"

"Yes, but we promised each other we wouldn't, didn't we?" interrupted George. "We swore we wouldn't. I stuck to it. I—I believed you broke your word, Tom."

"Do you believe me now, George, when I swear to you that I lay over there in that wheat-field all night and never went near Bennie Jaggard's house?"

"There is no reason why you should lie to me. Yes, I believe you. I was down yonder in the pasture all night. I have no reason for lying to you. There's no reason why I should lie to you either, Barbara."

There was a long silence. She was gripping the pickets again. They were just outside the glaring path of the automobile lamps. Her face was toward the light; it was unnaturally clear and distinct to the two brothers, gleaming like a dull splotch of white upon a black wall.

"I've got to be honest with you, Barbara," went on George at last. "I had made up my mind to shoot him later on. I'm offering no excuses. You can hate me if you like, —but that's the truth."

Tom groaned. "And for three years I've believed that you killed him, George,—for three years I've waited for you to—— Why, good God, I was beginning to hate you! Yes, I was beginning to——"

Barbara spoke, her voice low and intense. "I've hated

you boys because I thought one of you did it and was being shielded by the other,—as he ought to have done. I believe you now. You're not lying to each other. You *couldn't* lie to each other now. Oh, I—I am glad you didn't! I have got you back again——”

She held out her arms and an instant later the three tall, black figures were as one. All of them were sobbing, the two men murmuring inarticulate words in their sister's ears. Suddenly they felt her limp, sagging body stiffen in the double embrace.

“But some one did it. Some one killed him. Neither of you boys did it,” she was saying. Her voice sank to a whisper. “Then,—who was it?”

“By God!” cried George, the horror of sudden comprehension in his voice.

For a long time they stood there as if turned to stone, their bodies rigid. The sobbing ceased.

“Oh, Lord!” gulped Tom.

Barbara was the first to regain the power to utter a coherent sentence. Curiously, there was resignation, even tenderness in her voice.

“Some one who loved me killed him, boys.”

It was a long time before George spoke. “I can't go in there,” he said thickly. “I know why he sent for you, Barbara,—and us, too, I suppose. He wants all of us three together. Well,—I—can't face it, that's all. I haven't the nerve.”

“Now I know why he begged us to let him plead guilty when we were first arrested,” muttered Tom, his face working.

“I would have let myself be hung a dozen times before I'd have allowed him to do that,” said George, slowly. He put his hand over his eyes.

Barbara's cool, earnest voice took command of the tense situation.

"I've been through a good deal more than either of you," she said. "To begin with, I made the horrible mistake of thinking I knew who killed my husband. But I didn't know. You boys were sure that you knew. Well, here we all stand more in the dark than ever. We know absolutely nothing. We don't know who killed Bennie."

"I get your meaning, Barbara," said Tom, grasping her hand. "We don't know who did it. Everybody thinks that George or I shot him, so—so,—well, by thunder, let 'em go on thinking it. We'd be a couple of dirty, low-lived curs if we——"

"I'd shoot you myself, Tom, if you——" began George, but stopped as he felt his brother's hand gripping his.

"There is only one way," said Barbara, reaching down to unlatch the gate that had been between them all this time, "only one way, boys. I don't know why he wanted all of us together here this evening. Perhaps it was what you think, George,—perhaps it was because he is afraid he is going to die and wants to see us—to see us friends again. Well, I am the one who ought to give in. You had nothing against me, so it is for me to say that I have forgiven everything and that we are brothers and sisters once more, and his children. He loves us all. Come! We will go in together. Our arms around each other. That's what he wants. Maybe that's all he wants. If he sees——"

George gave voice to the thought that had entered the minds of the two brothers at the same time.

"There's something strange about it,—something I can't make out. If he had wanted to set things straight between us, Barbara, why didn't he do so at the start? Why did he let it go on all these years? He is our father. He——"

"Listen," she said, staying them as they started up the walk. "I'll never forget what I said to him that day up in Connecticut and I'll never forget the look in his eyes. I cursed the man who killed Bennie. I told him I'd hate you

boys as long as I lived. I told him I would hate him, my own father, to the end of my days, that I'd never look into his face again if I knew that he——"

"You needn't go any farther, Sis," broke in Tom, gently. "I guess we know now why he never said anything."

George, terribly shaken, gripped her arm. "See here, Barbara, you say you hated us. You say you cursed the man who killed Bennie. Suppose,—well, just suppose." He could not utter the words.

"I—I don't hate anybody now, George," said she, softly. "I shall never hate anybody again. It hurts too much."

They stopped at the foot of the porch steps.

"You've had a terrible day, Sis," said the older brother. "I'm—I'm sorry. I want you to know how my heart has ached for you."

She caught her breath. "Oh," she murmured, "I was just thinking what a wonderful day it has been. God forgive me!"

Tom stopped short, straightening his long figure and glaring first at one and then the other.

"Why, damn our measly hides, we ought to be shot,—all three of us," burst from his lips, hoarsely. "He is the finest man in the world. He is the bravest man that ever lived. And what are we making him out to be? Why, we—we're making him out to be a coward, a dirty hound, a—yes, worse than that! He's our father. We're his children. We ought to be shot! Do you suppose for a second he would have let George and me go to trial for—for this thing—if he could have helped it? Not much! He's not that kind of a man. He's no cowardly, sneaking—— Good God! What are we thinking of?"

George covered his eyes with his forearm. "He couldn't possibly have allowed his own sons to bear the—— Why, he loves us,—he would die for us. We must be crazy!"

"Some one killed Bennie Jaggard," muttered Barbara, doggedly.

"Rufe Playden always claimed it was a tramp," said Tom, a quick note of eagerness in his voice. "He was right. Rufe was always right about everything. He——"

"How could Rufus know? How could he possibly know?" cried Barbara, turning upon her brother. "He was only guessing."

"He knew as much about it as any one else," said George. "Everybody believed that one of us boys did it. Everybody else was wrong,—even Tom and I were wrong. Rufus was the only one who was right."

"He was sure we didn't do it," murmured Tom.

"Some one who loved me killed Bennie Jaggard," said Barbara, slowly, levelly.

Their eyes were on the lighted windows ahead of them. For a long time they stood there, shivering.

"I—I can't believe it," muttered George at last.

"Nothing on God's earth can ever make me believe he would sit back and let us——" began Tom, miserably, breaking off in the middle of the sentence.

But the seed of doubt was deeply sown.

"Over a hundred years ago," said Barbara, "men by the name of Wayne took a lone, defenceless man by the name of Jaggard out of his house and hanged him to a tree for stealing their horses."

Her brothers looked at her, sharply.

"What has that got to do with it?" demanded George.

"Nothing," answered she, after a moment.

"But that Jaggard was a low-down, ornery thief," protested Tom.

"So was this one," said she, harshly. "In the eyes of the Waynes."

"Oh, Lord!" groaned George, his chin sinking.

Presently Barbara spoke.

"So we will never know who killed Bennie unless——" She got that far and stopped. The light from a window fell upon her white, frowning face.

"Unless the one who did it confesses," completed George. Another tense period of silence. Then from Tom:

"Since we didn't do it and since Barbara believes us, I hope to God we never know."

"And so do I," said Barbara, lowering her head.

They went into the house, George pausing for a moment to straighten his figure and mask his face with a smile before he opened the door.

Shelby Wayne was sitting in a rocking-chair beside the table, drowsing. His head was bent and turned a little to one side. His left hand, hanging over the arm of the chair, was open; just below it, on the floor where it had been dropped, lay a sheet of foolscap paper.

Tom, obeying the cautious finger that Barbara laid upon her lips,—which were fixed in a rigid smile,—closed the door quietly. He came alongside her and she thrust her free arm through his. Then they tiptoed over and posted themselves in front of the dozing man, these three tall young Waynes who once were wee things and sat upon his knee.

"Father," said Barbara.

They waited for him to open his eyes and see them standing before him in—

George stepped forward and peered into his father's face. Then timorously, as if he were afraid, he touched his cheek with his hand.

"Good God!" he whispered.

"What is it?" cried Barbara, shrinking.

"Get Dr. Higgs here, Tom—quick! Something's the matter with him. He's gone—he's——"

"Oh, it can't be *that!*" cried Barbara, dropping to her knees beside Shelby Wayne. "He was all right only a few minutes ago. He kissed me and said he was happy to see me—and—and—told me to call you boys in and not let you stand out there in the cold. I remember he said—'There's a good girl, Barbara Lee,—there's a good girl.' Oh, George! It can't be *that!*"

Shelby Wayne was never to see his three children with their arms about one another. His heart had stopped.

The sheet of paper on the floor was his will. It was brief and clear, drawn two months before. The witnesses were Rufus Playden and Samuel Crouse. He left the farm on which they were born to his three children, share and share alike, with the proviso that it be retained and operated by them, jointly or otherwise, so long as they lived, and that until the day of their death they were to call it home.

And so the mystery of Bennie Jaggard's death was left forever unsolved for the three Waynes. Hurdleford had its own way of explaining the reconciliation that stirred and delighted the town. It took it for granted that Barbara forgave her brothers because they were the friends of the man she had come to love with all her heart, Rufus Playden. She could not very well overlook the fact, said Hurdleford, that he had remembered her brothers so handsomely in his will,—and were they not going to erect a memorial fountain in his memory? What if one of them did kill Bennie Jaggard?

THE END

